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A Study of Political Humour in British
Literature in the 1790s

by

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Declaration

This thesis, entitled ‘A Study of Political Humour in British Literature in the 1790s’, is entirely my own work. No parts of the thesis have been previously submitted for a degree anywhere.

Chi-Fang Chen

Abstract

British responses to the French Revolution are characterised by humorous expression in the literature of the 1790s. Yet political humour is often not readily harnessed to an immediate political agenda. ‘Political humour’ as an idea appears to be a contradiction and elicits a contradictory set of epithets, which falls into two distinct categories: ideological commitment and disinterested amusement. This thesis argues that it is this tension that contributes to the redrawing of the ambit of politics. This thesis continues the recent scholarly approach to the British response to the Revolution less as a formal ‘debate’ than as a ‘controversy’, which involves a diversity of cultural practices and experimentation of expression and social organisation. I argue that the employment of humour in the political literature of the 1790s provides extended or alternative means of political engagement. The political humour goes beyond topical political agendas and alludes to the eighteenth-century comic theory, which instructs ethical questions about social relation or ways of life.

I demonstrate that the claim to autotelic innocence of humour in the comic discourse of the eighteenth century was predicated on contradictory social tendencies: laughing either reinforces individual boundary or facilitates transmissive and collective conviviality. ‘Common life’, which denotes a social relation in settlement, is the existential horizon that enacts this contradiction. With ‘common life’ in crisis or contestation in the 1790s, and with social organisation under political controversy, humour as political disclaimer is thereby reworked into a particular political language. I read the comic discourses of Burke and the popular radicals, the satire of Peter Pindar, and the comic rhetoric of the anti-Jacobin novels to explore this political language. In doing so, this thesis seeks to suggest ways of reading the literary culture of the 1790s in terms of the circumscription or expansion of the scope of political life, so as to examine how humour contributed and responded to changes in political culture.

Introduction

The Problem of the Political Nature of Humour

Commenting on the graphic satire of James Gillray, the nineteenth-century historian Thomas Wright writes that wit is something *above* politics and history: ‘Party politics are transient, but wit survives, when the circumstance in which it originated is forgotten, or sunk into insignificance’.¹ But is it possible for Gillray’s viewer to enjoy his wit without the knowledge or a degree of empathy into the political events to which his wit was responding? What, then, does Wright suggest of the relationship between comic entertainment and politics? This study concentrates on the political humour, or the literature of comic expression, that prevailed in Britain in response to the controversies generated by the impact of the French Revolution in the 1790s. It analyses the formal features of humorous literature in relation to its political content, but not before first reconsidering critical methodology. I use ‘humour’ as an umbrella term, a convenient synecdoche of a set of key term of the comic modes of expression in the comic genres, ranging from modes of language of ‘wit’, ‘humour’, and ‘joke’, to genres of comedy, farce, satire, and parody.² I do so because the objective of

¹ Thomas Wright and R. H. Evans, *Historical and Descriptive Account of the Caricatures of James Gillray* (London, 1851), 174.

² The scope of ‘comic’ expression, as critics such as Harry Levin recognise, is indefinite. Nonetheless, Levin provides a methodological sleight-of-hand that may help us out of this critical impasse: ‘We might find a word of encouragement in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s dictum on games (a genus of which comedies are a species, as we shall be recognising). We should look, he tells us,

this study is not an analytical inquiry into the rhetorical systems of the comic modes of expression, but a political inquiry into, as this study will unfold, the social and pragmatic implications in the discourse and practice of any of these various modes. Also, I want to highlight the political tensions *among* these comic modes so that the 1790s can be properly represented as an age of controversy (for example, as I will show in the chapters, there are political contradictions in ‘comedy’ and ‘laughter’, or ‘comedy’ and ‘farce’). The range of these terms reflects the range of ethical and epistemological concerns in eighteenth-century discourse, which I shall address in questions raised in this thesis.

Wright’s suggestion that a value of innocent amusement can be extracted from a humorous expression, even if it is produced in a specific political and historical context, may well be put to doubt in our critical climate, in which hardly anything can escape the dimension of the political. However, his judgment indicates some of our critical problems. At any rate, he is articulate in his assertion that ‘wit’ is regarded as something timeless and can be singled out and appreciated in its own right, while ‘politics’ is hopelessly bound up with its context. But, from the fact that some aesthetic value can be politically contextualised, it does not follow that this value in humour can be reduced to yet another political variable. A question thus surfaces about the very scope of both ‘politics’ and ‘humour’.

in *Philosophical Investigations*, not for a single formula but for a network of similarities, relationships, and family resemblances (*Familienähnlichkeiten*). See Harry Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4.

By ‘aesthetic’, I mean a particular dimension in the modern sense of the word, in which the value of something is determined in its own right rather than by its utilitarian function, a value of immediate pleasure that is invested in the particular, autonomously self-defining in spite of its context, and can be singled out from its political or moral concerns.³ I take the ‘autotelic’ attitude to the ‘particular’, *inter alia*, to be an ideological element shared by the eighteenth-century discourse of ‘humour’.⁴ If autotelic disinterestedness is one defining character of the aesthetic, as well as ‘innocent’ amusement, then it

³ The modern idea of the aesthetic certainly involves reference to the Kantian notion of uniqueness in particular, though the dimension of autonomy in the idea of the aesthetic continues to be shared by modern critics and philosophers across the political spectrum. Although it is widely acknowledged that autonomy is by no means the sole nature or sufficiently defining characteristic of the aesthetic, and that it is subject to contestations about its range of moral and political meanings, critics from Left to Right still take the autonomous dimension as an indispensable point of departure. For modern ethical or political reflections on the aesthetic in this light, see Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Methuen, 1974); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), esp. ch. 1; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), and *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), esp. ch. 9.

⁴ This understanding finds echoes in modern criticism on comedy and aesthetic. Some twentieth-century philosophical reflections associate the aesthetic with the comic in this metaphysical premise. See, for example, Steven Connor’s reading of Terry Eagleton’s *Ideology of the Aesthetic* as informed by the metaphysical reflection on the comic. Connor, ‘Art, Criticism and Laughter: Terry Eagleton on Aesthetics’, Lecture at ‘Aesthetics, Gender, Nation’, University of Oxford, March 1998, <<http://stevenconnor.com/artlaugh.html>>. However, in his essay ‘Comedy and Finitude’, Simon Critchley argues that modern European aesthetics establishes a ‘tragic-heroic’ paradigm that systematically represses the alternative ‘comic’ paradigm. Yet Critchley’s concentration on the Continental tradition may not fit the eighteenth-century British context snugly, which precisely substantiates its aesthetic discourse with reflections on the comic. See Critchley, ‘Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis’, in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 217-38.

immediately poses a paradoxical problem for humour as a political expression. Of course, it may be argued that it was with historical distance that Wright could write with an aesthetic distance from the Revolutionary context, yet what is intriguing is that the contemporary uses of political humour in the 1790s, even those which involve salient agendas, emphasise its aesthetic neutrality.

Instances of this kind abound, not least in the famous caricature, Richard Newton's 'Treason!!!' (1798; see Illustration, p.7). Newton's caricature was produced in the wake of the government's broadened definition of treason in answer to the subversive threats, which, as John Barrell argues, evolved from 'aristocratic crime' as 'direct or indirect attempts on the life of the king' to effect aristocratic regime change, to a diversity of cultural practice that jeopardised 'the whole constitution'.⁵ Mocking the government's paranoid fear of subversion, Newton's caricature has John Bull farting at a picture of the King. Newton's wager clearly lies in the argument that jokes and laughter are innocent enough to disclaim political purpose. However, the point is that Newton's depoliticising statement is precisely his political argument. He obviously disputes with the government's style of rule that, according to Newton's interpretation, over-politicises an innocent, disinterested and innocuous practice of humour. However, Newton's rhetorical economy, which vividly presents a political case in apolitical language, shall not obscure the ambiguities compressed in the very economy of his satire. Although the King and the government (represented by

⁵ John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129.

William Pitt's head probing in from outside) are the subjects of the satire, it is John Bull who takes the centre stage. The 'king', on the other hand, is a print version on public display who suffers John Bull's asphyxiation vicariously. If we imagine that John Bull is a private reader making fun of the public print image of George, Pitt looks like a government intruder into private space. It is the space of the plebian joke that is at the centre, while the government, represented by Pitt, functions like a censorious voiceover. Here Pitt becomes an amusing killjoy in comedy, a gadfly of the plebian carnival. The near absence of the king and the government from the public stage may imply that political power can remain intact behind the curtain. Society is ambiguously both under and out of control.⁶

Such rhetorical sleight-of-hand that plays with the ambiguity between political agenda and apolitical laughter is also a far cry from the Hobbes's understanding of laughter, which conceived laughter as a political utility. Hobbes in the seventeenth century defined the passion of laughter as 'a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison

⁶ Vic Gatrell provides an interesting speculation on why Newton escaped government prosecution: 'Had *Treason!!!* been prosecuted, the court would have been obliged to debate whether Newton himself had the seditiously "wicked purpose of ridiculing the king and royal family", or whether he was merely warning against that wickedness, as his defence would have claimed. He would also have been protected by the need to read out in court an indictment in pompous legalese that would have to describe a farting figure. This would have so punctured the law's solemnity that prosecution would have been counterproductive.' Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic, 2006), 485. Gatrell's suggestion implies that prosecution of a work of this nature will render the ambit of treason law in particular and government control in general alarmingly unstable and self-subversive. This teases out the problem of the ambit of politics itself in the 1790s which will be a main theme in this study.

with the infirmities of others'.⁷ If a sense of triumph is the key to the nature of laughter, then the ontological attribute of laughter would seem to be politically *functional*. Laughter is understood in terms of political warfare, in which it is effective in gaining superiority over others. But Newton's message to his government censors — that he is just laughing — shifts the terrain of the question from the use of laughter to the act of laughing itself. Or, the terrain shifts from the political purpose under a particular practice of humour to the nature of humour as such. Certainly, Newton's rhetoric may still involve a sense of superiority (over the caricatured Pitt, for instance). The radical satirists in the 1790s surely still welcomed forms of triumph such as laughter in the warfare with their political enemies. Yet the significance of Newton's piece is the way in which its satirical edge is delivered through a treacherous emptying of immediate semantics. The semantic void opens up pragmatic possibilities. Newton raises the question of whether or not laughter should be regarded as a political expression at all. The question of laughter, in short, concerns a shift of focus from what laughing does to what laughter is.

⁷ *Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), I.IX.13-14, 54-55.



Illustration 1, Richard Newton, 'Treason!!!', (1798)

The very idea of ‘political humour’ may strike one as an oxymoron, as the two words may evoke contradictory sets of epithets: humour is often understood as disarming, disinterested, diverting, affectively detached, anti-heroic, comic, innocent, autotelic, aesthetical, and innocuously ‘private’; while politics concerns power, interest, identity, propaganda, confrontation, tragic struggle, commitment and ‘public’ spirit. The matter, I contend, lies both in the *politics* of humour and the *political character* of humour, the latter raising the question of whether humour is to be regarded as a political expression at all.

With this in mind, I wish to intervene the scholarship on political humour in this period. Humour may serve to consolidate received wisdoms or entrench reactionary stereotypes, as well as to estrange or undermine them. It can be radical or reactionary, lending itself both to ‘resistance’ and ‘control’.⁸ For all the adequate acknowledgements of the radical diversity of humour, however, these studies often constrain analyses on the phenomenological level. When cracking a joke in a politically sensitive context, for example, and when the joking individual defends himself with statements like ‘it’s only a joke’ or ‘have a sense of humour!’, it is less a comment on the content than on the contextual condition.

⁸ I can only provide a very selective list here. Nevertheless, all the studies in the following list addresses the methodological issues I have been discussing: Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (eds.), *Studies in Political Humour: In between Political Critique and Public Entertainment* (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011); Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Marjolein 't Hart and Dennis Bos (eds.), *Humour and Social Protest* (Cambridge; New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2007); Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (eds.), *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Chris Powell, George E.C. Paton (eds.), *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988).

Either it accuses the listeners of making what in philosophy is called a ‘category mistake’, of judging a performative, aesthetic practice with analytical and moral criteria, or it displaces political content in the comic frame of reference to disclaim responsibility. On the other hand, retorts to this disclaimer such as ‘it’s not funny!’ serve either to banish humour from the realm of serious political topics, or to reintroduce political responsibility to the practice of humour. In either case, this raises questions about what humour and politics consist of and where their boundaries lie. Questions of this kind must not be overlooked in favour of questions of their historicity. In a political context, the statement ‘It’s only a joke’ not only depoliticises the joke but also at the same times defines the boundary between humour and politics. Political humour concerns the question of how to approach the relationship between politics and humour, not only in terms of how humour expresses and mediates political arguments, but also in the sense that humour may shift the terrain of engagement or sometimes even threaten or undo its political cases altogether, teasing out questions as to what constitutes a political question at all.

To ask what it means to say ‘it is only a joke’ in political contexts enables us to approach a much-neglected question. Humour as a political expression in the Revolutionary era has attracted scholarly attention, and there are numerous criticisms undertaking to analyse humorous expression in political contexts. Many of them, however, are more often conducted *ad hoc* than systematically (for instance, mockery as a practical strategy to dismiss or discredit particular targets). Certainly, some criticisms undertake to analyse the nature and the

political attributes of humour, yet they often too neatly situate their analysis in certain unequivocal political interests. A popular approach is to see political humour as a satiric strategy that challenges received values and orthodoxy, such as the focus on ‘subversive’ laughter in the literature by the politically disenfranchised — the lower orders, woman, etc. — to assess humour as a democratic or feminist intervention into power and hegemony.⁹ Sometimes critics tend to make hasty ontological statements. In reading radical humour of the romantic period, Marcus Wood makes a generalising assertion that ‘parody’ is essentially subversive.¹⁰ But Newton’s parody of government witch-hunting, I have noted, may involve ambiguous use of humour as an end in itself that may or may not fully comply with his radicalism. And it will be dubious to apply Wood’s judgment to anti-Jacobin parody of radicalism. Many feminist readings on the humour of women writers seem to conclude that women’s humour is *ipso facto* radical because it involves blasting patriarchal authority and its monopoly of humour.¹¹ Yet it is uncertain, for instance, whether the comic caricature of the extravagance of sensibility in the women novelists is radical or conservative. Among other things, this kind of approach may subscribe to the received critical

⁹ Scholars on popular radicalism tend to present its humorous expression as a subversive carnival against oppression or strict discipline. See Joseph Butwin, ‘Seditious Laughter’, *Radical History Review*, 18 (1978), 17-34; James Epstein, *Radical Expression* (Oxford, 1994); Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790-1822* (Oxford, 1994); Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 5.

¹⁰ Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture*, 13.

¹¹ See e.g. Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism* (Detroit, 1998); Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (Basingstoke, 2005).

wisdom that comedy represents a world upside down, and thus is naturally subversive. But reactionary humour in the literature of the 1790s was as flourishing.

It is for this reason that this study will undertake to read political humour on both sides of the political spectrum. As a matter of fact, languages of wit and humour characterise a good deal of the British responses to the impact of the French Revolution, from both sides of the political spectrum. Political humour pervades the republic of letters on political questions in the 1790s: for instance, Thomas Paine's comic ridicule of the political establishment in *Rights of Man*; the comic political satire of John Thelwall, Thomas Spence and William Cobbett; the comic plays of 'Jacobin' novelists such as Thomas Holcroft and Elizabeth Inchbald; the 'subversive' laughter in the political parodies of Daniel Eaton, Charles Pigott, Richard 'Citizen' Lee and numerous anonymous popular authors; the caricatures of James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson, Isaac and George Cruikshank; the mock-epical attack on the British political regime by the extremely popular political satirist, John Wolcot ('Peter Pindar'); the conservative satire of William Gifford and the 'anti-Jacobins'; the counter-revolutionary humour in the conservative, or 'anti-Jacobin', novels by Isaac D'Israeli, Elizabeth Hamilton and many others; let alone the numerous, mostly anonymous pamphlets and ephemeral prints ridiculing the politics and the fashions of the time. To clarify, this study does not seek to exhaust this vast literature in a comprehensive survey. Its objective is to reconsider the critical approaches that appear to me to require a more systematic and ideological

inquiry. In fact, works of political humour are often tonally nuanced, politically and ethically tricky. They problematise perceived reality, and entertain subversive visions *without* espousing radical or oppositional commitment. To name only one of the numerous examples, the satire of John Wolcot, as I will show in Chapter 3, produces jokes that alarm the loyalists, while being distant from radical ideologies in some respects. More problematic still is the existence of loyalist political humour, which, sometimes powerfully, reveals the ideological contradictions or wistfulness of the radicals, and in this sense subverts the ideology of the *oppositions* while vindicating and consolidating the ruling orthodoxy in crisis. Above all, the problem of humour for its own sake in political rhetoric is often why its political message can be read ambivalently and equivocally. It implies that humour can be to a certain extent an independent category that merits inquiry into its nature, scope and ideological system. Because of the problematic apolitical rhetoric, it is important not to rely on pre-judgement of the political tendency of humour. I contend that the political nature and character of humour should be rethought systematically before we attempt to decipher the significations in a political humour.

Joke as a Political Expression and the Political Community

By accentuating the slippery character of humour, this study reconsiders the theoretical issues surrounding comic expression in the political controversy of the Revolution. Comic expression, by virtue of its ambivalent character between

satiric allegory and autotelic amusement, posed immediate semantic difficulty for the contemporary audience. An illustrative example is the humorous attacks on the British state by popular radicals, which sit ambiguously between a hidden seditious or revolutionary project and innocuous entertainment. Take, for instance, John Thelwall's animal fable 'King Chaunticlere', which resulted in Daniel Isaac Eaton's trial for high treason for publishing it. The fable allegedly compares the King to a gamecock, which is decapitated because of its tyrannical behaviours among fellow cocks. The plot was read as a seditious allegory for regicide.¹² John Barrell discusses how the ambiguities of the humorous language posed difficulties of interpretation and probably played a role in the government's failure to pin down the fable's meaning and convict the radicals:

The humour of these [radical] imaginings may certainly sometimes have been strategic: it seems quite likely for example that Thelwall believed that his fable could teach that the only good king was a dead king, but that by passing it off as a simple *jeu d'esprit* he could ridicule the notion that he was also in earnest in recommending the king's execution. But humour may also have allowed radicals to avoid asking themselves exactly what these regicidal imaginings were about and whether they were in earnest or not. It may also have been, for many of them, an essential condition of their being able to imagine the king's death at all. They had passed their whole lives in

¹² See Daniel Isaac Eaton (ed.), *Politics for the People; or a Salmagundy for Swine*, 8 (16 Nov. 1793), 102-07. For a modern edition of the text, see Nicholas Mason (ed.), *British Satire, 1785-1840*, vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 44-46. For a useful discussion, see Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 112-18.

the aura and shadow of the quasi-mystical authority of the Crown, and there must have been a huge psychological barrier in the way of conceiving its extinction, a barrier which, if it could not easily be shifted, could be got round, so to speak, by humour.¹³

Barrell's reflection addresses the many nuances of political meaning in Thelwall's humour. As Barrell suggests, it is ambiguous whether humour assists political expression and interpretation or frustrates it. If humour can pass itself off 'as a simple *jeu d'esprit*', then the semantic correspondence between words and the real meanings can be bracketed, and the whole verbal act displaced to autotelic performativity. Secondly, if, by assuming a poetic license in which moral and political transgression can be symbolically allowed, humour helps to lift the 'psychological barrier' caused by the supposed indestructibility of political power or illegitimacy of subversive action, then it also suggests that this method of self-protection shifts the terrain of argument to a place where the government will find it difficult to impose its power to prosecute. In other words, this escape into the vicarious enjoyment of subversion, where the scope of government policing fails to reach, could become a paradoxical empowerment for radicals. Barrell effectively points out that, in addition to strategic concerns, humour may also be employed as a byway of political engagement in addition to direct and literal confrontation. Humour may frustrate the attempt to determine its political tendency because of its facetious and playful tonality, or because of its bearing on the old ethical dilemma between jest and earnestness, but it does at

¹³ John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, 122.

times function as an indirect form of political expression that can either provide shelter from political responsibility or for illegitimate opinions that are otherwise banished from political orthodoxy.

In a sense, humour can be regarded as a byway of political expression that can complicate and reinvent, if not problematise, political questions. Mark Philp has regarded ‘King Chaunticlere’ as a demonstration of radical experimentation and exploration for alternative political languages to ‘high theory’.¹⁴ For Jon Mee, ‘King Chaunticlere’ exemplifies the radical literature of the 1790s as a ‘bricolage’ rather than a prescribed, well-executed formal language of Enlightenment rationality, for it shows that the popular radicals often did not share orthodox political platforms but rather had to explore alternative styles of political participation.¹⁵ Mee has raised this historical and methodological issue in many other cases of popular radicalism, and has thereby repeatedly contended that these popular radicals evidence a shared central theme that the political dispute of the 1790s was less of a ‘debate’ than a ‘controversy’. The idea of ‘debate’, Mee argues, ‘suggests some kind of exchange between stable, well-defined subject positions’ which cannot adequately describe the more protean form of radical expression and radical readership that characterised the dispute.¹⁶ It is important to note that the evolution from ‘debate’ to ‘controversy’

¹⁴ Mark Philp, ‘The Fragmented Ideology of Reform’, in Mark Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 70-72.

¹⁵ Jon Mee, “‘Examples of Safe Printing’”, *Censorship and Popular Radical Literature in the 1790s*, in Nigel Smith (ed.), *Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 81-95.

¹⁶ Mee, ‘The Political Showman at Home: Reflections on Popular Radicalism and Print Culture in the 1790s’, in Michael T. Davis, 42. For his case studies on such popular radicals as Richard

and the diversity of political expression was certainly a shared reality across the political spectrum.¹⁷ Because the political horizon was unstable under the conditions of the Revolution, in which the formerly politically disenfranchised (both of radicalism and conservatism) were demanding wider participation politically as well as culturally, a formal, highly-regulated ‘debate’ was unable to accommodate a diversity of political demands.¹⁸

The indefiniteness of the political horizon reminds us of Barrell’s thesis of the limitless *politicisation* of various aspects of social life in the 1790s in his more recent work. Barrell expounds on this theme and sheds light on a variety of cultural and social practices that gained a political character in the politically

Lee and Charles Pigott, see ‘The Strange Case of Richard “Citizen” Lee: Poetry, Popular Radicalism, and enthusiasm in the 1790s’, in Timothy Morton and Nigel Smith (ed.), *Radicalism in British Literary Culture, 1650-1830: From Revolution to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151-66; ‘Libertines and Radicals in the 1790s: The Strange Case of Charles Pigott I’, in Peter Cryle and Lisa O’Donnell (eds.), *Libertine Enlightenment: Sex, Liberty and Licence in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Palgrave, 2003), 185–203; “‘A Bold and Freespoken Man’: The Strange Career of Charles Pigott II’, in David Womersley (ed.), *Cultures of Whiggism’: New Essays on English Literature and Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Newark, New Jersey: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 330–50.

¹⁷ I will elaborate on this theme particularly in my discussion of conservative humour in Chapter 4.

¹⁸ Mark Philp points out that the development of conservatism in the 1790s was also not restricted to the elite but was seeking extension into a popular base. See his ‘Vulgar Conservatism, 1792-3’, *English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), 42-69. For elaboration on such development, see Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), particularly chapter 2 on Hannah More and her *Cheap Repository Tracts*.

charged 1790s.¹⁹ This study adopts an approach that is in broad agreement with Barrell's thesis, which rightly recognises that, among other things, humour opens up an alternative horizon of political engagement. Yet I believe a more systematic inquiry into political humour beyond Barrell's passing remark is needed, and it does not seem very clear how far Barrell has considered that the idea of universal politicisation is not fully commensurable to the received wisdom that all critical questions are by nature political. This thesis of 'politicisation' implies that the scope of politics was in flux; a diversity of modes of expression, then, is not only a symptom of a politically indefinite era, but also a necessary means of addressing issues that were only newly politicised and therefore had to rely on innovative or unorthodox modes of address. Although the aestheticism of humour can certainly be approached in terms of particular political frameworks, it is not to be reduced to another political variable. 'Politicisation' as a verb implies that the ubiquity of politics was still developing in the 1790s, rather than that the political character of cultural and practical issues was permanent. The scope of politics was malleable to the extent that politicisation and depoliticisation could be at work simultaneously. Humour, in my view, reflects a historical process regarding how a political life is imagined or lived in the 1790s.

It is important to stress that humour contributes to determining a way of political life because it instructs or implies of the ways in which political

¹⁹ See, in particular, John Barrell, "An Entire Change of Performance?" The Politicisation of Theatre and the Theatricalisation of Politics in the mid 1790s', *Lumen*, 17 (1998): 11-50, and *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

community is recognised and organised. By recognising alternative political expressions at work in the 1790s, Mee and Barrell rightly suggest, though sometimes only covertly, that the broadened controversy inspired by the use of other modes of expression goes beyond the level of argument to the level of identity and the political life as such. The language of depoliticisation in humour, in this sense, can be viewed as a departure from the consensual 'political' forum of the linguistically and behaviorally regulated 'debate' to create new social spaces where ideological contents are extended to the question of how political community is constructed in which to live a political life. As Michael Scrivener writes of 'English Jacobinism' in the case of Thelwall, it involves the reshaping of the public sphere and the very style of life in radicalism.²⁰ According to Cecil Thelwall's *Life of John Thelwall*, Thelwall's Chaunticlere joke 'was told with such an irresistible spirit of humour, that it at once put an end to argument, and was received with shouts of laughter and applause'.²¹ The significance of joke lies not as much in the validity of argument as in the tightening of radical community through the ritual of solidarity in laughter.

Humour as a Way of Life and Byway to Knowledge

The critical commentaries of Mee, Scrivener and others on radical humour suggest that the humour should be understood not simply as practical political

²⁰ Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories*, *passim*.

²¹ [Cecil] Thelwall, *The Life of John Thelwall* (London: John Macrone, 1837), 110. See also Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories*, 118.

weapons but also as particular ways of constructing and organising the culture and social relations of radicalism. Such is the meaning of radical rituals, print culture, symbolism, and the byways of political ‘controversy’, to which I shall return in Chapter 2. Indeed, Richard Newton’s disavowal of political tendency likewise delivers a message that laughter is an expression of a lifestyle which takes pleasure in laughing, regardless of its content. This dimension of social life as a broad ideological content of humour is what I want to foreground in this study. Although I have so far used the examples of radical humour as my opening gambit, I want to stress that humour as a way of life is the common ground across the political spectrum in the 1790s. This study wants to sideline the utilitarian, topic-centered approach to humour in the political context and to inquire into the political nature of humour because, by constructing political communities and defining ways of life, ‘humour’ contains intrinsic value system that merits a political inquiry in its own right, with or without reference to topical political agendas.

Influential theories of comedy in the twentieth century such as Freud, Bergson and Bakhtin point out that humour must be understood in terms of its sociality and its philosophy of life. Freud recognises that joke is a social process with which one defines relations with others; Bergson and Bakhtin conceive laughter and humour as a celebration of life in company.²² Although the details

²² Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Strachey and Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1976); Henri Bergson, ‘Laughter’, in Wylie Sypher (ed.), *Comedy: ‘An Essay on Comedy’ by George Meredith and ‘Laughter’ by Henri Bergson* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 61-190; Mikhail I. Bakhtin,

of eighteenth-century humour do not always fit snugly into these theoretical models, its ethical outlook does corroborate the general validity of these modern theories. Comedy in the eighteenth century was not simply to be utilised but to be *lived*. ‘Humour’ has broadened its semantic scope from political or moral utility of ridicule to an attitude towards human life, not least in the famous example of Laurence Sterne’s pronouncement of laughter as a philosophy of life ‘against the spleen’.²³ This development corresponds to the burgeoning of popular comic print in the eighteenth century. The jest-book, for example, does not hesitate to stress that joke is an integral part of the physical and mental economy of everyday life: ‘The chearfulness or mirth, as a relaxation from the cares and business of the world, is as necessary for proper existence of man through life, almost as food to satisfy cravings for hunger, or sleep to rest the weary limbs, and fit the body for the renewal of the toil and fatigues of the day, will not admit of the smallest dubity’.²⁴ The uses of humour in the 1790s very often allude to and negotiate with the eighteenth-century theory and philosophy of humour, wit, and comedy. Because much of the literature I investigate is conscious of its practices being problematic of political expression, this study will pay special attention to the eighteenth-century comic theory and criticism.

The chief category with which the eighteenth-century comic literature

Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984).

²³ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 239.

²⁴ *The Wit's Magazine; or, New Convivial Jester* (Sunderland, 1782), [iii].

explicates or expresses their take on humour as a way of life is that of ‘common life’. In fact, ‘common life’ was established as the province of comedy in eighteenth-century criticism. Authors subscribing to this critical paradigm include Addison, Arthur Murphy, James Beattie, George Campbell, Hugh Blair, John and Anna Letitia Aikin (Barbault), and many others.²⁵ ‘Common life’ is a notion that delimits the language of comedy as that of the mundane and commonplace. An article in Henry McKenzie’s periodical *The Mirror* maintains that the language of ‘humour’ has to ‘descend to common and ludicrous pictures of life; if, in short, he is to deal in humorous composition, his language must be, as nearly as possible, that of the common life, that of the bulk of the people’.²⁶ As Beattie puts it: ‘The language of Comedy is that of common life improved in point of correctness, but not much elevated; — both because the speakers are of middle and lower ranks of mankind, and also because the affairs they are engaged in give little scope to those emotions that exalt the mind, and rouse the imagination.’²⁷ In Hugh Blair’s words: ‘the action of Comedy being more familiar to us than that of Tragedy, more like what we are accustomed to see[ing] in common life, we judged easily of what is probable, and are more hurt by the

²⁵ Murphy will be discussed in Chapter 2. See below for discussion of Beattie, Campbell, Blair, and the Aikins. See also John Adams, *Elements of Useful Knowledge* (London, 1793), 226: ‘Comedy is an agreeable imitation of the actions, humours, and customs of common life’; and Vicesimus Knox, ‘On Ridicule, as a Test of Truth in Common Life’, *Essays Moral and Literary*, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1779), 1: 241-53.

²⁶ *The Mirror*, 83 (22 Feb. 1780), 80. See also Conclusion.

²⁷ Beattie, *Essays on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition*, 3rd edn. (London; Edinburgh, 1779), 210-11.

want of it.²⁸ For Blair, the subject of comedy should be kept apart from the transcendent majesty of tragedy and wayward fancy and exoticism, and concentrate on the immediate life world: ‘In the managements of Characters, one of the most common faults of Comic Writers, is the carrying of them too far beyond life’. He adds: ‘Certain degrees of exaggeration are allowed to the Comedian; but there are limits set to it by nature and good taste.’²⁹ John and Anna Aikin contrast comedy with its generic opposite, tragedy: they assert that modern tragedy ‘removed too far from the rank of common life’.³⁰ In general, the eighteenth-century comic critics employ the idea of ‘common life’ as concrete experience of the mundane in contrast to the elevated or the transcendent.

As for ‘humour’, it is conceived as a productive force in human life and a byway to knowledge in the eighteenth-century intellectual and cultural tradition. It is concomitant with the discourse on British national character as a humorous cast of mind, and a comic outlook that partly characterises the British Enlightenment.³¹ In a century customarily construed as an age of reason, ‘comic’

²⁸ Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, (London: W. Strahan, 1983), 3: 364-65.

²⁹ Ibid, 368.

³⁰ John Aikin and Anna Laetitia Aikin, ‘On the Province of Comedy’, in *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose* (London: J. Johnson, 1773), 21.

³¹ See the classic account in Stuart Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), ch. 5. For wit and humour as a component of ‘Englishness’, see Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 286-90.

or ‘ludicrous’ language was also regarded as a productive practice.³² The recognition of the significance of humorous expression in relation to the question of meaningful knowledge includes the familiar controversy over ridicule as a test of truth, which originates from a religious context.³³ The recognition of the productivity of wit and humour was concomitant with the development of ‘incongruity’ theory, which was set to replace Hobbes theory of superiority.³⁴ Generally, ‘incongruity’ works by mismatching codes or texts. It is that which disrupts the imaginary harmony in the perception of reality. As James Beattie puts it, ‘a ludicrous object must be made up of several parts; that the parts whereof it is made up must be in some degree inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous; and that they must be considered as united in one assemblage, or as

³² For a study that addresses forms of quixotism as an alternative mode of ‘reason’ to Enlightenment rationality, see Wendy Motooka, *The Age of Reasons: Quixotism, Sentimentalism, and Political Economy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). Curiously, however, Motooka reads Addison as an absolutist of reason, which, though sensible in some cases, overstates her case and overlooks Addison’s emphasis on human faculties other than reason. The platitude of ‘Enlightenment’ as a shorthand of reason has provoked some other revisionist accounts, not least in Roy Porter’s re-evaluation of the British version of Enlightenment culture. See Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000).

³³ For a useful survey of the controversy, see Thomas B. Gilmore, *The Eighteenth-Century Controversy over Ridicule as a Test of Truth: A Reconsideration* (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 1970).

³⁴ See a classic account in Stuart Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). See also Chapter 1 below. For other useful accounts of incongruity theory, though not always historically accurate concerning its origins, See John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), and Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

acquiring a sort of mutual connection from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.’³⁵ This incongruity theory of humour broadens the Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge, because it perceives productivity in seemingly unproductive discord and absurdity. Addison at the beginning of the century revises Locke’s seventeenth-century distinction between ‘wit’ and ‘judgment’ and argues that it is possible for wit to go by a different route to attain judgment and knowledge than that of rational language.³⁶ Later, Joseph Priestley adds that the perception of comic incongruity is capable of producing knowledge from an otherwise unrecognised source, as the surprise comes along with ‘quick succession of thought’ and ‘enlargement of idea’.³⁷

The comic mode of expression thus went beyond its negative function of ridicule and was introduced by eighteenth-century thinkers and literati into the production process of knowledge and pleasure. The semantic development of ‘wit’ and ‘humour’ in the eighteenth-century criticism reflects that the comic mode of expression was conceived not merely as a rhetorical device. ‘Wit’ as verbal and intellectual ingenuity and ‘humour’ as psycho-physiological condition have widened their semantic and ethical ambits to denote the disposition to engage in the mirth of social life. Shaftesbury’s rejection of Hobbes’ thesis of egotism, one can recall, involves the ‘freedom of wit and humour’ that affirms and expresses human sociability and the art of pleasing in the company of the

³⁵ James Beattie, *Elements of Moral Science* (Edinburgh, 1790), 1: 162.

³⁶ See Joseph Addison, ‘No. 62’, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1: 263-70. See also Sitter, *Arguments of Augustan Wit*, 62-64.

³⁷ Joseph Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), 197-98.

polite. Albeit in ways that are distinct from those of reason, wit and humour are also conducive to communication and the pursuit of knowledge in a particular communicative and imaginative economy.³⁸ Addison claims that the *Spectator* endeavours to ‘enliven Morality with Wit and to temper Wit with Morality’ as a means of bringing moral and aesthetic categories together in reciprocity as part of his Enlightenment project.³⁹ Samuel Johnson’s operative definition of wit as ‘*discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike’, reflects an eighteenth-century understanding of the inventiveness of language in wit capable of making sense out of apparent nonsense.⁴⁰ Mark Akenside states in *The Pleasures of Imagination* that ‘some stubborn dissonance of things’ is productive of comic incongruity that ‘strikes on the quick observer’. The wit necessary for this perception will ‘aid the tardy steps of Reason’.⁴¹ ‘Humour’, on the other hand, moves from physiological pathology in the seventeenth century to a mark of original ‘character’ that can offer the vitality of a sociable milieu to eighteenth-century secular philosophy. In the seventeenth century, Samuel Butler pronounced that ‘Humour is but a Crookedness of the Mind, a disproportioned

³⁸ John Sitter provides a revisionist account of the eighteenth-century arguments and uses of wit, not as mere verbal cleverness dismissed by Locke in the seventeenth century, but as imaginative pursuit of alternative ‘truth’ that bequeaths a legacy to the Romantics. See John Sitter, *Arguments of Augustan Wit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³⁹ Addison, ‘No. 10’, *The Spectator*, 1: 44.

⁴⁰ Samuel Johnson, ‘Cowley’, in John H. Middelndorf (ed.), *Lives of the Poets, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 26. Cf. *Rambler* 167: ‘*Concordia discors*, that suitable disagreement [of mind] which is always necessary to intellectual harmony’ See *Yale Edition*, 5: 123-24.

⁴¹ Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination* (Dublin: George Faulkner, 1744), 83, 87.

Swelling of the Brain, that draws the Nourishment from the other Parts, to stuff an ugly and deformed Crup-Shoulder'.⁴² In the eighteenth century, 'humour' was affirmed by a host of intellectuals as an evidence of the British diversity of characters and a reason for their self-congratulation of an 'English liberty' that prided itself not only on its toleration for eccentricity, but also on its fostering of amiability and benevolence in amusement.⁴³ In general, the etymological changes in 'wit' and 'humour', corresponding to the incongruity theory, show the growing (Enlightenment) relish for the irreducible plethora of worldly experience that infinitely enlarges the scope of knowledge and pleasure. It reflects the growing relish for the particular — hence, in a sense, the aesthetic character.

These discursive developments, particularly 'common life' as a general practical horizon, appear to be apolitical, but I shall demonstrate that their distinct political character is precisely inherent in the depoliticising language. Chapter 1 will investigate the eighteenth-century comic theory to explicate and to identify the ideological strains that are still present in the political controversy of the 1790s. The discursive paradigm I discuss is the hegemonic culture of politeness, which proposes a theory of wit and humour that are set within the ethos of civil society in commercial Britain that encourages diversity of individuality. It is in this cultural milieu that the theory of 'incongruity', often produced in the perception of the variety of individual oddity, was established to

⁴² Samuel Butler, *Characters and Passages from Note-Books*, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1908), 138-39.

⁴³ See Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 289-91. For humour and English 'liberty', see also Chapter 1 below.

define a comic way of social life. It is also in this discursive milieu that the idea of 'common life', whose semantic scope dwells ambiguously inside and outside the political, was established as the legitimate content of comedy. I argue that the generally depoliticising discourse of the comedy of 'common life' harbours its own implicit political contradiction in the form of the crowd, which signifies the potential overturn of that the version of 'common life' in civil society. This latent (or repressed) political contradiction in the comic theory (re-)surfaced in the wake of Revolutionary events when fear of crowd ('mob') politics mounted and when the flood of political writings responded to these events.

The subsequent chapters investigate three different cases in the 1790s and address the problem of humour in the politicised milieu in terms of the social dimension of the comic theory expounded in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 reads Burke's *Reflections*, which goes far beyond technical constitutional issue to raise questions concerning the political community substantiated by the comic ways of life. It is now widely recognised that Burke's polemic concerns far more than the clash of two political systems. It concerns two ways of social being, one dictated by abstract 'metaphysic' and the other by 'custom', experience and the dense fabric of 'common life'. This fundamental approach concerning how social life is organised is also true of his popular radical critics. I will explain how the political disagreements between Burke and the popular radicals can be understood as the controversy between two kinds of comic social orders: the one informed by the manners of civil society and the other generated by spontaneous, diffusive laughter of the popular congregation. Chapter 3 turns to

the case of the satiric humour of Peter Pindar to explore the political significance of the controversies around his 'inoffensive sport'. I discuss Wolcot's take on 'humour' not only as mere purposeless joking but also as a vital element in the maintenance of cultural, literary, and, through a medical metaphoric of the body politic, national, health. Chapter 4 reads the comic performance of the 'anti-Jacobin' novels at the end of the decade and analyses the ways in which depoliticising comedy serves as an elaborate method of social and literary regulation. I discuss comedy as a method for reducing the scale of social intercourse to a much more manageable size than that of the crowd, namely the size of the small community fit for the regulated realm of the 'common life' in the conservative ideal.

Chapter 1

The Comedy of 'Common Life' and the Social Theories in the Eighteenth-Century Comic Discourse

This chapter explains the relevance of the eighteenth-century comic theory to the comic literature of the 1790s. Scholars have paid much attention to the social aspect of the eighteenth-century comic theory and practice. The comic theory generally falls into the paradigm identified by Stuart Tave's classic account of 'amiable' humour, which relies on sociability and sympathy rather than Hobbesian egoism and hierarchy.¹ Recently, Simon Dickie's rediscovery of the mid-century comic literature demonstrates the discrepancy between this theory and the practice. The vulgar, Hobbesian kind of 'cruel' jokes of the socially inferior, which contradicts its own principle, was popular even among the polite cultural elite.² Dickie's counterexamples show that social and political prejudices persist and that the marriage between comedy and middle-class virtue remains a theoretical ideal. But his point is that the practice contradicts the

¹ Stuart Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

² Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Cultural historians have also shown that a wealth of comic literature was ostensibly at odds with the culture of 'politeness'. See Ronald Paulson, 'The Joke and Joe Miller's Jests', in *Popular and Polite Art in the Age of Hogarth and Fielding* (Notre Dame; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 64-84; Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic, 2006).

theory. I want to explain in this chapter that the political anxiety exists *within* the theory itself, and often precisely in its sociable and depoliticising language, which in my view contains contradictory tendencies that can be formulated as a political antagonism explained below.

This chapter will situate the discourse of comedy of ‘common life’ in a more concrete theoretical and social context and point out that the depoliticising philosophy of a comic life actually involves specific social theories that merit political inquiry. I will explain that the eighteenth-century comic theory was constructed in response to the plurality of society in the commercial milieu in which moral questions were reformulated in terms of sociability, civility, and a worldly, empiricist outlook. I shall also demonstrate how the depoliticising discourse of comic disinterestedness is constructed and how that can be viewed as a particular formulation of the political antagonism that played out in the political controversy of the 1790s. I argue that the discourse of comedy of ‘common life’ involves contradictory conceptions of social relation, which provide materials for political controversy later. I argue that ‘common life’ as horizon of the innocent and disinterested amusement may yield a figurative political antagonism because of the contradictory social theories: on the one hand, the hegemonic (and polite) theory and ‘comedy of character’, by depoliticising political conflict into aesthetic particularism, consolidates individual boundary and obscures systematic political inquiry. On the other, this critical hegemony yields its figurative obverse: the homogeneous collectivity in the form of the crowd, whose indiscriminate laughter threatens diversity that the polite theory

wants to privilege and preserve.

1.1 The 'Decline' of Satire and the Emergence of Modern Comedy

The transition from Hobbes' theory of laughter to the that in the 'incongruity' theory, as Tave has accounted, hinges on the change in ethical attitude from mean triumphalism to one that is dedicated to more tonally softened or neutralised, ethically sociable and sympathetic mode of communication. A correspondent development is a gradual shift in the generic paradigm in the eighteenth-century literature and criticism of humour. Satire was thought by some twentieth-century scholars to have gone into decline with the rise of the novel, the rise of Romanticism, the development of aesthetics and the culture of 'sentiment', and so on.³ Recent studies, on the other hand, have provided revisionist accounts of the persistence of satire well into the Revolutionary as well as the Romantic period, if not beyond.⁴ Nevertheless, whatever position one would take concerning the decline or survival of satire, a crucial aspect of this scholarly debate lies in satire's ambivalence that can be couched, for the sake of analytical convenience, in terms of the contrast between

³ A more recent and sophisticated account, though still subscribing to the narrative of the decline of satire, is Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment, 1660-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴ See Gary Dyer, *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Steven E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* (New York: Macmillan, 2000). For all its rediscovery of the vitality of satire in the Revolutionary period, however, Dyer's historical narrative only relocates the transition to a later period in the nineteenth century.

‘satire’ and ‘comedy’. Despite the different approaches by Stuart Tave, Thomas Lockwood, Vincent Carretta, David Nokes, Ronald Paulson, Gary Dyer, Frank Palmeri, and Richard Terry, an implicit consensus is satire contains its playfulness and, for all the fluctuations of its historical development, became in many ways less tendentious or partisan, and more performative, self-reflexive or benevolent.⁵ Often, stylistic performance outweighs the underlying moral message it conveys. Lockwood goes so far as to conceive of it as a transition from the ‘satiric’ to the ‘comic’. Humour, once a rhetorical instrument for the public morality of satire, turns into private enjoyment. As ethical questions are displaced, these studies suggest, political ones are thereby bracketed. Of course, the exact moment of occurrence of this transition, or indeed its existence at all, is subject to contestation. Some scholarly accounts suggest that the double character of the satiric and the comic in satire exists even in its heyday in Pope.⁶ ‘Satire’ itself, recent studies continue to emphasise, has been a problematic term

⁵ Lockwood, *Post-Augustan Satire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979); Tave, *The Amiable Humorist*; Carretta, *The Snarling Muse* (Philadelphia, 1983), ch. 8; Carretta, *George III and the Satirists from Hogarth to Byron* (Athens, 1990); Nokes, *Raillery and Rage: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Satire* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987); Paulson, *Don Quixote in England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), discussed below; Dyer, *British Satire 1789-1832* (Cambridge, 1997); Palmeri, *Satire, History, Novel: Narrative Forms, 1665-1815* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), esp. 126-42; Terry, *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper* (Aldershot, England, 2005), esp. ch. 8.

⁶ Howard Weinbrot reads Pope as a synthesiser of the ‘Juvenalian’ and ‘Horatian’ tradition, capable of balancing, in my convenient terms, the satiric and comic approaches. See Weinbrot, *Alexander Pope and the Traditions of Formal Verse Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). See below, p.33.

that serves as a convenient signifier for a diversity of literary practices.⁷ Yet it is also true that the ‘aestheticisation’ of satire broadens its scope rather than contributes to its demise. The rhetorical shift, in addition, corresponds to the ethical adjustment. As studies have shown, satire was often attacked for its aggressiveness and partisanship that increasingly baulk at what Stuart Tave calls the principle of ‘amiability’ against (satiric) ‘spleen’, which lies at the heart of the emergent ethical hegemony of sociability and sentimentality of the commercial society.⁸

Concomitant with this development was the eighteenth-century reception of the Roman satirical paradigms, such as the opposition between ‘Horatian’ and the ‘Juvenalian’ modes. While ‘Horace’ for the eighteenth-century critics refers to comic and conciliatory humour, ‘Juvenal’ is regarded as a voice of moralistic, confrontational rage. Furthermore, ‘Juvenalian’ satire was considered more pointed, personal and tendentious on specific political issues, in contrast to the ‘Horatian’ tradition, which placed emphasis on the general, impersonal revelation of human faults and foibles. Scholars report that ‘Horace’ was

⁷ See a recent comprehensive survey in Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658-1770* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

⁸ Tave, *The Amiable Humorist*. David Nokes reads the subtlety of eighteenth-century satirical performances and emphasises the complication of satire’s ‘rage’ by more playful, ‘comic’ take on human faults, idealism and propagandist use of language: Nokes, *Raillery and Rage*. Frank Palmeri discusses Hume’s criticism of satire as an expression of partisanship and his effort to moderate and contain political antagonism and fanaticism: Palmeri, *Satire, History, Novel*, 126-42.

favoured by more critics of the in the eighteenth-century.⁹ At the end of the century, however, this became another source of political controversy over the work of John Wolcot, to which I will return in Chapter 3.

I do not seek to enforce the demarcation between ‘satire’ and ‘comedy’. I use this generic critical phenomenon to foreground the contradiction between aggression and conciliation that exists within the ambivalence of humour itself. Certainly comic aesthetics and its implied disinterestedness cannot fully play down partisanship, as it constitutes an integral part of the political rhetoric I have emphasised. But a crucial question is how such comic disinterestedness can be politically contextualised, and who in the eighteenth century were able to speak of disinterestedness within certain political framework. A case in point is the Whigs, who developed the political theory of disinterestedness and the aesthetic. Ronald Paulson’s *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter* expounds illustratively how modern comic theory establishes comedy as a genre in its own right by parting with satiric and political functions. Paulson identifies a changing epistemology that most of the aforementioned scholars gloss over, as well as its ethics in the transition from the satiric to the comic. His argument echoes the critical wager of literary historians such as Michael McKeon, who approaches the comic novels of Fielding and Smollett, in which the satiric dimension is

⁹ For a survey of this eighteenth-century critical reception, see Howard D. Weinbrot, *Alexander Pope and the Traditions of Formal Verse Satire*, ch. 1 and 4. See also W. B. Cronochan, ‘Satire, Sublimity, and Sentiment: Theory and Practice in Post-Augustan Satire’, *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 60-67.

somehow transformed or neutralised by the presence of ‘aesthetic pleasure’.¹⁰ Paulson argues that ‘satire’ was ‘depoliticised’ into ‘comedy’ through the development of a specific line of aesthetics. *Don Quixote in England* is in part built on Paulson’s previous book *The Beautiful, Novel and Strange*, which argues that the birth of aesthetics in the eighteenth century concerns the shift of attention from religious morality and Platonic abstraction to the particular, ‘novel’ and ‘strange’. For Paulson, aesthetics is a secular product that defines itself against religious or Platonic disinterestedness. Rejecting John Barrell’s history of the discourse of disinterestedness in civic humanism, which, Paulson argues, monolithically plays down differences within Whiggism, Paulson proposes two Whiggisms: the one with Shaftesbury as its paradigm which values landed, aristocratic control against private interest, and the other starting with Addison, which is more bourgeois, landless, explorative and open-ended. A new kind of ‘disinterestedness’, formulated from Addison to Hogarth, appreciates the

¹⁰ See Paulson’s acknowledgement of his debt to McKeon, *Don Quixote in England*, xiii. On Fielding, in relation to the moral enterprise of Richardson, McKeon writes: ‘Fielding meets Richardson at the nexus where moral and social pedagogy hesitate on the edge of their transformation into something else entirely, aesthetic pleasure’. See Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 408. McKeon continues this approach in his reading of Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*, whose ‘aestheticisation’ of narrative form problematises conventional reading of the novel as a satire on luxury as a contemporary vice. See McKeon, ‘Aestheticising the Critique of Luxury: Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*’, in Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds.), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2003), 57-67.

contingent, the flawed and the unusual in the empirical world as its own end.¹¹ It is this new Whig ethos, continues Paulson in *Don Quixote in England*, with which Addison severs ‘beauty’ from ‘norm’ in the paradigm of Shaftesbury and Swift, who take laughter to be a moral corrective to or critique of deformity. Shaftesbury, Paulson observes, conceives disinterested laughter as corrective from a moral high ground of public spirit, which seeks to ratify excess of unsociable self-indulgence. Whereas in Addison, individual flaws and oddities can turn from objects of satire or ridicule into a disinterested, aestheticised amusement in its own right. Since Addison, an eighteenth-century tradition emerged, in which satire was ‘depoliticised’ in the form of comedy: the ideal is suspended and the actual is accepted, and Sancho Panza’s empiricism aestheticises, neutralises and laughs at Quixote’s idealism. Paulson calls it ‘the aesthetics of laughter’, which is derived from an Addisonian ‘pleasures of the imagination’.¹² The valorisation of ‘pleasures’ expands the ambit of Enlightenment pursuits by appreciating unidentified values of the residue of experience through the ‘aesthetic’ byway of reason, such as wit and humour.

Paulson’s reading provides a useful note to the narrative of the gradual

¹¹ Paulson, *The Beautiful, Novel and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Hogarth, argues Paulson, synthesised the two traditions, creating a ‘middle area’ between the Beautiful (Platonic abstraction) and the Sublime (the body as a site of desire, the uncommon, novel and strange). For Barrell’s account of civic humanism, see *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: ‘The Body of the Public’* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986). Barrell argues that civic humanism is an aristocratic political theory that public affairs should be left to a learned elite whose freedom from labour guarantees their disinterestedness.

¹² Paulson, *Don Quixote in England*, 20-31.

separation between satire and comedy in the course of the eighteenth century (also discussed in his early book *Satire and the Novel*). The ancient (Aristotelian) notion of comedy as a representation of the low and ugly was one reason for its inseparability from satire, in that both were a representation of reality held up to a moral norm. Once ‘comedy’ developed the aesthetic dimension that weaned off the moral weight of satire, it became a genre in its own right.¹³

The present study acknowledges a debt to Paulson’s theoretical formulations. However, his critical interest seems to lie chiefly in the formation of a cultural genealogy from Addison to Hogarth, more than how this tradition of aesthetic ‘disinterestedness’ was maintained or troubled throughout the century. Nor is Paulson significantly attentive to his authors’ political anxieties that are conspicuous in their construction of comic theory. Moreover, as I will discuss in the next three chapters, this language of depoliticising humour was repackaged as political expression in the political controversy of the 1790s. Paulson’s reading in general concerns chiefly a change of attitude and epistemology, and is less elaborate on the political and ideological conditions needed to situate ethical questions in more material dimensions.¹⁴ His thesis that the Aristotelian hierarchy is replaced by an appreciative acknowledgement of novelty and strangeness in ordinary life leaves a largely unaddressed question of whether

¹³ Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1967), esp. ‘Augustan Satire — and Comedy’, 52-72.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, Paulson does offer a helpful note on the concrete political backgrounds for the two kinds of Whiggism, although in my critical framework it may or may not be an essential information: while Shaftesbury was of the landed aristocratism, Addison represents the ‘landless’, more bourgeois, liberalism. See *The Beautiful, Novel and Strange*, 74.

social hierarchy is bracketed or simply disappears.¹⁵ At any rate, Addison's comic aesthetics, or more particularly his Sir Roger de Coverley, which is Paulson's paradigmatic model of the eighteenth-century comic character, can indeed be more specifically contextualised. The introduction of polite manner to replace political enmity, as Marvin Becker argues, contributes to the maintenance of 'civil society'. Becker adds that Addison's language of polite toleration towards a Tory gentleman represents the historical development where 'the esthetic jostled the rudely political'.¹⁶ Sir Roger de Coverley becomes a harmless and depoliticised character as he is situated in a particular social setting in Addison's literary representation. Addison imagines a transformation of political conflict into aesthetic pleasure through the gentlemanly associative life in which men and manners in social intercourses displace partisanship.

Thus the paradigmatic change of the satiric genre corresponds to a change in political thinking in the eighteenth-century theory. Don Quixote, who could be read as a manifestation of a political conflict between ethical codes of the past and the present, serves as another illustrative case in point of the re-contextualisation of political conflict in the everyday social setting. As Corbyn Morris put it in 1744, although Quixote's '[a]dventures in general [are] too *gross* and *disastrous* . . . you yourself, if [Quixote] existed in real Life, would be fond

¹⁵ Paulson, *Don Quixote in England*, esp. 76.

¹⁶ Marvin B. Becker, *The Emergence of Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century: A Privileged Moment in the History of England, Scotland, and France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 68.

of his Company *at your own Table*'.¹⁷ Because the eighteenth-century literary reception of Don Quixote decontextualises this character from its political and historical matrix of chivalry to the dining table, the mode of the engagement with the political enemy is transformed. The new ethics of sociability the eighteenth-century comic theory involves a new form of (a-)political engagement concerning *living* with one's political enemy on a shared existential horizon. Thus we can now turn to the discourse of this practical category of 'common life'.

1.2 'Common Life' and the Comedy of Character

Notwithstanding Paulson's reading of Shaftesbury as a custodian of norm against anomaly, particularity and diversity are not always unequivocally discredited in Shaftesbury's work. Shaftesbury's celebration of 'the freedom of wit and humour' is based on his chauvinist panegyric of the British 'liberty', supposedly realised in its cultural diversity and the variety of wit, and exclusively possessed by 'miscellanarian race' such as 'we islanders'.¹⁸ Shaftesbury was confident that the variety of 'wit and humour' the British enjoys was founded on this condition. His claim clearly echoes the emerging hegemonic discourse of the early eighteenth century of the diversity of 'character' as a

¹⁷ Corbyn Morris, *An Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule* (London, 1744), 38-40. The italics at the end of the quote are mine.

¹⁸ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 379.

testimony of British ‘liberty’.¹⁹ This development was coterminous with the rise of the ethical discourse related to the dictates of sociability in response to the rise of commerce.²⁰ Indeed, both Shaftesbury’s and Addison’s rewriting of Hobbes’ comic theory can be understood as an attempt to establish the polite discourse of sociability. A concomitant development is the privileging of ‘comedy of character’ over the ‘comedy of intrigue [i.e. plot and action]’.²¹

In addition to the espousal of aesthetic disinterestedness and the soft virtues of civility and ‘politeness’, I will add here that the comic theory in question can be understood as a response to the plurality in the civil society in commercial Britain. It is reflected in the rising discourse of the proliferation of ‘character’ in the British environment. The apparent imperial chauvinism in this discourse aside, I hope to demonstrate that incongruity theory of comedy is constructed to protect the cultural identity of the civil society of politeness in commercial

¹⁹ On this point, see Stuart Tave’s account in *The Amiable Humorist*, 91-105.

²⁰ On the reinvention of moral language in response to modern commercial Britain, see, among others, the case study of the Scottish intellectual modernisers in John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Donald, 1987), and ‘The Imperative of Sociability: Moral Culture in the Late Scottish Enlightenment’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 13 (1990): 169-84.

²¹ Adam Smith suggestively argues that unlike tragedy, in which the environment dominates the individual, comedy must centre on the individual. ‘Ridicule must consist in the character represented: Ridicule that is founded only on the Ridiculousness of the circumstances into which the Persons are brought without regarding themselves is the lowest species of wit and such is hardly tolerable in the common Story’. See Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, ed. by J. C. Bryce, in A. S. Skinner (gen. ed.), *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 4 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 121-24. See also Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, (1783), eds. by Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 544.

Britain against the categorical otherness of the popular 'vulgar'.

Comedy of 'character', which relishes individual particularity and contributes to the aestheticisation of comedy in the eighteenth century, is theoretically situated in the social horizon of 'common life'. But what exactly is the semantic range of 'common life'? Epistemologically as the empirically mundane, the conception of 'common life' surely resonates with David Hume's work. With a practical and secular approach to knowledge and pleasure, Hume frequently employs 'common life' as a keyword to refer to empirically based, practically lived experience in contrast to abstract 'reason'.²² Hume's characterisation of 'common life' epitomises the British empiricist tradition, which privileges the richness of lived experience against the poverty of 'theory'.²³ In this vein, Burke in the 1790s defends the inviolable organicism of 'common life' against the onslaught of Revolutionary theory.²⁴ On the other hand, the emphasis on 'common life' as a crucial interest in the British Enlightenment may be traced at least back to Addison of the *Spectator*, who, as Hume also does later, shifts engagement from the religious context to the pleasures of 'imagination' and sociability of the gentlemen in the secular daily

²² See, for example, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 122, 124.

²³ For a history of British hostility to theory, see David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See Chapter 4, Sec. 1 for more discussion.

²⁴ The agreements between Hume and Burke with regard to 'common life' also include their shared view that it is structured by customs and prejudices available in a given society. See Chapter 2 for Burke. See also Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

setting. Hume's 'common life' is often mentioned in connection with 'conversation', 'pleasure' or 'commerce', and this displays his thinking of the concrete lived experience as a basis for his secular ethics of sociability.²⁵ If 'common life' denotes such a sociable setting, one can therefore find an explanation of Paulson's formulation of satire's transmutation into comedy in Addison as the suspension of political conflict in favour of the 'flow' of conversation.²⁶ I shall argue that 'common life' harbours its own kind of political contradiction or conflict which, though probably not as directly partisan as that of satire, still bequeaths to the 1790s some ways of imagining political life.

The thrust of Hume's (re-)introduction of 'common life' into philosophical inquiry is not epistemological but social-ethical. It is a realm into which philosophical energy must be invested in order not to lapse into the self-indulgence of abstract speculation. As Hume famously declares, 'philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.'²⁷ It requires active engagement in sociable conversation with which the (polite and commercial) civil society is

²⁵ Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 535.

²⁶ For Addison's 'narcissistic' mode of conversation, which privileges a conflict-free 'flow' over free contestation, see Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 38-58.

²⁷ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 121.

maintained.²⁸ James Beattie, Hume's fellow Scotsman and a major theorist of humour, also suggests such association between 'common life' and social ethics.²⁹ Indeed, 'life' may be a rather vague signifier of worldly experience, but 'common' connotes shared, communal, in addition to ordinary.

It is in the existential, social horizon of 'common life', according to the comic theory, that the comedy of 'character' is situated. The association of 'common life' and sociability patently contributes to the cultural hegemony of commercial society. However, in this liberal, depoliticising milieu political concerns regarding the accommodation of individual 'characters' abides. A first political problem concerns individuals who prove incongruous to the society of 'common life'. This individual is the 'humourist', characterised by a degree of impracticality or unsociability that runs at odds with the demands of sociability of 'common life'. The idea of 'humour', from which the 'humourist' derives, comprises two semantic levels. It is, on the one hand, an acknowledgement of human diversity, and, on the other, a theory of a certain disposition to sociable action (e.g. 'good-natured' humour). Its etymological antecedent in the seventeenth century, namely the conception based on the physiological determinism of the four bodily fluids on temperament and mental disposition still presided in the eighteenth-century, but it had gained a new dimension of meaning, as a penchant for social amusement and personal traits conducive to the production of comic effects. 'Humour' often overlaps individual 'character',

²⁸ See, again, Livingston's *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, esp. ch. 1.

²⁹ On this point, see Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, 207.

traits and temperaments odd and eccentric enough to gain distinctiveness. Morris writes that ‘the chief Subjects of Humour are Persons in real life, who are *Characters*’.³⁰ George Campbell also asserts that ‘The subject of humour is always character’.³¹ In the eighteenth century, the semantics of ‘humour’ and ‘character’ continued to overlap to a certain extent. This development was reflected in the popularity and predilection for individuals with distinctive traits that become understood as ‘humourists’; that is, a person, a ‘character’, who possesses or is possessed by his or her particular ‘humour’. In the seventeenth century, ‘humour’, as a condition of physiological balance, indicated the familiar social taxonomy of pre-established ‘types’ of character. Samuel Butler’s taxonomy of ‘characters’ as general individual types include ‘humourist’ as a key category.³² In the eighteenth century, as a discourse of toleration for eccentricity and diversity emerged, human subjects, as ‘characters’, were increasingly conceived as singular aesthetic objects. Addison speaks of Sir Roger de Coverley’s ‘singularities’ as ‘Contradictions to the Manners of *the World*’ (my italics).³³ Likewise, The Aikins understand the ‘humourist’ as ‘a character distinguished by certain ludicrous singularities from *the rest of mankind*’ (my italic).³⁴ Conspicuously, the opposition between the individual character and the vague universal referents such as ‘the world’ and ‘the rest of mankind’

³⁰ Morris, *True Standards*, 12.

³¹ George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: W. Strahan; and T. Cadell; Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1776), 59.

³² Butler, *Characters and Passages from Note-Books*, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1908).

³³ Addison, ‘No. 2’, in Daniel F. Bond (ed.), *The Spectator* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 1: 7.

³⁴ Aikin and Aikin, ‘On the Province of Comedy’, 15.

contributes to obscuration of any concrete political analysis of the social incongruity.

Deidre Lynch has argued that literary 'character' evolved from an outward excess of a single material feature in the eighteenth century to an inward-turning 'round' personality in Romantic literature.³⁵ This private 'character' marks, Lynch notes, the move from the Theophrastan conception of the exemplary toward the exceptional.³⁶ In my view, however, such fascinating yet forceful account of the historical transition might not apply when it comes to the character of the comic genre. I would like to point out that in the comic character, outward material excess and solitary introversion coexist as two integral features. Certainly, 'character' and 'humourist' are not synonymous, but the idea of a single distinctive feature or behavioural pattern, often to the degree of oddity or eccentricity, is what these two concepts have in common. If eccentricity defines the 'humourist', a question emerges as to how such characters can tend towards productive sociability. Stuart Tave's survey of the 'humourist' concerns its transition from satiric disposition to softened and 'amiable' sociability, but he does not properly address the potential confusion or conflation of, as well as the

³⁵ Deidra Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³⁶ Lynch, and Dror Wahrman later, have illustrated the historical peculiarity of the eighteenth-century concept of the self as an industry of malleable yet identifiable character types in the marketplace, which gave way to the late-century reinvention of irreducible and unique individuality with inner depth. Lynch, *The Economy of Character*; Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004).

efforts to distinguish between, the humourist as a subject and as an object.³⁷

Corbyn Morris distinguishes the ‘humourist’ from the ‘man of humour’: a ‘man of humour is one, who can happily exhibit a weak and ridiculous Character in real Life, either by assuming it himself, or representing another in it, so naturally, that the whimsical oddities, and Foibles, of that Character, shall be palpably expos’d. Whereas an [*sic*] Humourist is a Person in real Life, obstinately attached to sensible peculiar Oddities of his own genuine Growth, which appear in his Temper and Conduct’.³⁸ Eighteenth-century reflections on ‘humour’ are fraught with this kind of dilemma between the seventeenth-century conceptual legacy of personal oddity and the eighteenth-century notion of ‘humour’ as a form of communicative sociability. According to the early discourse of the gentleman in Shaftesbury and Addison, one trait that distinguishes the gentleman is his ‘good-humour’, or open-mindedness in resistance of the misanthropic ‘ill humour’. Shaftesbury’s notion of ‘character’, in particular, is often a polite,

³⁷ ‘Humourist’ was synonymous with ‘satirist’ in the Elizabethan period. For useful accounts, see Charles R. Baskervill, *English Elements in Jonson’s Early Comedy* (Austin, 1911), ch. 3; Tave, *Amiable Humourist*, 92. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, many uses of the ‘humourist’ still retain the idea of the satirist or the learned wit. ‘Humourist’ was the title of some essay collections in the eighteenth century that offer opinions on presumably unlimited subjects as a ‘satirist’, but sometimes also as a conversational essayist, a communicator, a philosophical wit. See, for example, Thomas Gordon, *The Humourist: Being Essays upon Several Subjects* (London, 1720); Anonymous, *The Humourist: Being Essays on Several Subjects; Treating of The Author, A Rake, Love, Gaming, Gallantry, Drinking, Adultery, Dancing, Matrimony, A Birth Day, Cuckoldom, Merit, Good and Bad Wives, Physick, Virtue, A Birth Day, Virtue, Rich and Poor Clergy, Taste, Gods of the Heathen, Masquerade, Transmigration, Visiting Days, Ingratitude, &c. &c.* (London: J. Coote, 1763; H. Serjeant, 1764).

³⁸ Morris, *True Standards*, 15.

sociable gentleman who can regulate his 'humour'.³⁹ 'Humour' in Shaftesbury and Addison is often short for 'good-humour', or open-mindedness in resistance to 'ill humour'. Addison sometimes uses 'humourist' to describe a person of a more self-isolated lifestyle who 'gives up all the Compliments which People of his own Condition could make to him, for the Pleasures of helping the Afflicted, supplying the Needy, and befriending the Neglected. This Humourist keeps to himself much more than he wants, and gives a vast Refuse of his Superfluities to purchase Heaven, and by freeing others from the Temptations of Worldly Want, to carry a Retinue with him thither'.⁴⁰ Steele adds that 'The witty Man sinks into a Humourist imperceptibly, for want of reflecting that all Things around him are in a Flux, and continually changing'.⁴¹ Steele's complaint not only expresses the moral outlook of sociability of which Steele was a key contributor to the discourse, but also, notably, teases out an idea of the private humourist whose reciprocity with society is completely absent.

The conception of Steele's humourist grammatically resembles that of Henri Bergson's comic character. For Bergson, comedy occurs when an individual's

³⁹ In an early fragment, Shaftesbury writes of 'character' as a balanced personality that manages to juggle between 'jest' and 'earnestness', 'mirth' and 'gravity'. The model for this ideal character should be a Whig gentleman supposedly capable of improving his 'character' towards disinterested liberty through cultivation and regulation but not indulgence or moral dictates of jest. 'Character', in Benjamin Rand (ed.), *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), 192-206.

⁴⁰ Addison, 'No. 264', *Spectator*, 2: 527.

⁴¹ Steele, 'No. 260', *Spectator*, 2: 511.

persistently singular mode of action fails to respond to the flux of social life.⁴²

However, while Bergson regards laughter as a corrective to unsociability, the eighteenth-century comic theorists are more ambiguous about their ethical attitude towards individual aberration. If the idiosyncrasy of the characters of humour baulks at communication with their social surroundings, they will mark the end of the productivity of social intercourse. The ‘humour’ of the humourist is defined as something at odds with social rhythm, and it is characterised as an excess energy. How, then, can that energy itself be still productive of comic pleasure which does not hamper but promotes sociable ethics?

The aesthetics of incongruity theory may serve as a theory of communicational economy that transforms potential political conflict into social productivity. The seventeenth-century taxonomy of ‘characters’ in Samuel Butler categorises types of individual that should be considered as social outcasts. In the eighteenth-century comic theory, these outcasts are in certain ways recycled into an alternative process that can be productive in communication. One method is through the medium of print, which displaces failures of social intercourse. As a remark on the characters in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* in the *Critical Review* powerfully explains the age’s predilection for the character as the life of amusement:

Characters are distinguished merely by their opposition to some other characters; remove the contrast, and you annihilate the personages, just as

⁴² Henri Bergson, ‘Laughter’, in Wylie Sypher (ed.), *Comedy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 61-190.

little wits in conversation are reduced to mere inanimate figures, when you have taken away the fool who drew forth their talents. How different from this is the ridiculous simplicity of Adams, the absurd vehemence of Western, the boisterous generosity of Bowling, the native humour of Trunnion, and the laughable solemnity of uncle Toby! Each character singly is complete; without relation to any other object they excite mirth. . . . Every sentence, and every action, diverts by its peculiarity; and hence it is that the novels in which those characters are to be found, will furnish perpetual amusement, while others, which entertain merely from the nature of the incidents, and the conduct of the fable, are for ever laid aside after single perusal: an engaging story will bear relating but once; a humourous character will bear viewing repeatedly.⁴³

A 'character' is sublimated into an aesthetic object of 'perpetual amusement', which 'singly is complete'. The otherwise socially inept characters such as Parson Adams, Squire Western and Uncle Toby are translated into sources of vitality in fictional narrative in a similar manner to that described by Paulson in his analysis of the 'Don Quixote' in eighteenth-century English society. Indeed, Sterne's literary aesthetic encourages tolerance of eccentricity and Quixotism in the scenes of common life. It seems that those humorous characters can be aestheticized by the *Critical Review* because of the medium of print, which displaces the failure of social intercourse onto the page, so that a failed

⁴³ *Critical Review*, xiii (May 1762), 427-28; Reprinted in Alan B. Howes, *Laurence Sterne: The Critical Heritage*, (London; Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1974), 145-46.

sociability in ‘real life’ can be transformed into comic impetus as an alternative sociality between the author and the reader.⁴⁴ As a result of the eighteenth-century re-conception, the humourist was transformed from the pathological notion of deviation from the human norm to the very notion of the human norm itself. The early Edmund Burke writes on Sterne’s Walter Shandy as a ‘humourist . . . not uncommon in the world’.⁴⁵ In his reflections on Sterne, Coleridge concludes that one of Sterne’s achievements is the recognition of the universality of eccentricity: ‘In short, to seize happily on those points in which every man is more or less a *humourist*’.⁴⁶

The key to understanding the transition of the meaning of the ‘humourist’ from the satiric to the comic, in a word, is that the pathological is now regarded as useful. So eccentrics are not to be ousted or cured but tolerated, kept and utilised for comic production. But, as the humourist is appreciated as an aesthetic subject, eighteenth-century comic aestheticians are also concerned with the social and moral framework in which such aesthetic value can be safely appreciated without the onset of political conflict. Celebrated ‘humourists’ of

⁴⁴ For the alternative ‘sociality’ of print in the example of Sterne’s novels, see John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), ch. 4.

⁴⁵ [Edmund Burke], review of *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Annual Register*, iii (1760), 247; reprinted in Alan B. Howes, *Sterne: The Critical Heritage* (London; Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1974), 106-07. See also Chapter 2, Sec. 1.

⁴⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘1818. Lectures on the Principles of Judgment, Culture, and European Literature (London Philosophical Society)’, in R. A. Foakes (ed.), *Lectures 1808-19: On Literature, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 5 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), II: 175.

eighteenth-century literature, such as Sir Roger, Parson Adams, Uncle Toby, and Don Quixote, can be liberally allowed to perform their eccentricities because of at least two literary pre-arrangements of their social being. First, they are situated in the innocuous scenes of ‘common life’; second, they are morally irreproachable, so that their eccentricities can be passed off as marks of harmless personality. This aesthetic manipulation of political conflict finds expression in Addison’s Sir Roger, a ‘humourist’, because the political difference constituted by his Toryism is displaced to the retired scene of everyday social intercourse in the coterie of Mr. Spectator. As Addison puts it:

my Friend Sir Roger, amidst all his good Qualities, is something of an Humourist; and that his Virtues, as well as Imperfections, are as it were tinged by a certain Extravagance, which makes them particularly *his*, and distinguishes them from those of other Men. This Cast of Mind, as it is generally very innocent in it self, so it renders his Conversation highly agreeable, and more delightful than the same Degree of Sense and Virtue would appear in their common and ordinary Colours.⁴⁷

Because Sir Roger’s ‘good quality’ and ‘virtues’ temper his otherwise disagreeable ‘extravagance’ of a humourist, and because the extravagance is manageably ‘tinged’ to his cast of mind, it turns out to afford delight to the ‘conversation’ as the imagination adds pleasure to common life. As a ‘humourist’ in country common life, rather than a Tory partisan at court or parliament, Sir Roger is the example with which Paulson verifies his argument about the

⁴⁷ Addison, ‘No. 106’, *Spectator*.

aestheticisation and depoliticisation of Addison's humour. The horizon of 'common life' is therefore already a regulatory and prescriptive, rather than a descriptive, category. Since the affirmation of 'common life' is often bound up with the polite ethics of sociability and conversation, 'common life' is often restricted to private domestic setting of small company, in which the partisanship of the satire is absent. This ethics that hinges on 'common life' can be associated with the effort to do away with what Hume calls the 'party-rage' and 'selfishness' of satire as a political genre and transmutes it into a progressive, commercial, 'conversable' world.⁴⁸ In this kind of social setting for comedy, politics is of a more moderated kind, but does not disappear altogether.

'Common life' in Addison and Hume concerns social intercourse, but another key dimension that cannot be played down is community. 'Common life' is certainly a ubiquitous buzzword, casually or rigorously used, in all kinds of literature of the eighteenth-century, but should its reference be as wide as its appearances in all contexts to refer to the plethora of lived experience? The scope of its social application is indefinite. In other words, 'common life' is presumably class-inclusive, if not class-blind. In the context of comedy, John and Anna Letitia Aikin note that 'genuine Comedy knows no distinction of rank, but can as heartily enjoy a humourous picture in the common walks of life'.⁴⁹ But the connotation of either 'universal' or 'ordinary' in the 'common' in 'common life' may come to contradict each other in certain semantic contexts. Samuel

⁴⁸ See Frank Palmeri's discussion in his *Satire, History, Novel*, 126-30.

⁴⁹ Aikin and Aikin, 'On the Province of Comedy', 22.

Johnson, for example, conceives ‘common life’ as the life of the common people, not that of the elite:

The true state of every nation is the state of common life. The manners of a people are not to be found in the schools of learning, or the palaces of greatness, where the national character is obscured or obliterated by travel or instruction, by philosophy or vanity; nor is public happiness to be estimated by the assemblies of the gay, or the banquets of the rich. The great mass of nations is neither rich nor gay: they whose aggregate constitutes the people, are found in the streets, and the villages, in the shops and farms; and from them collectively considered, must the measure of general prosperity be taken.⁵⁰

Johnson’s idea of ‘common life’ does not particularly encompass the entirety of lived experience, but concentrates on the ‘manners’ and ‘character’ found in the life of common people and unavailable in ‘the schools of learning’ and the ‘palaces of greatness’. Therefore, Johnson concurs with the tendency to situate this concept in a demotic context while excluding the elite. As an article on the *Mirror* puts it, ‘common life’ refers to the experience of ‘the bulk of the people’, and sometimes more specifically the ‘low life’ in which ‘ludicrous representation’ can be best invested.⁵¹

Johnson’s conception of common life, in another sense, recalls the antagonism inherent in the terminology of ‘civil society’ as local community in

⁵⁰ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (London: A. Strahan; T. Cadell, 1785), 45.

⁵¹ For ‘ludicrous representation of low life’, See *Mirror*, 83 (1780), 80.

opposition to the political elite or the state. The political character of ‘common life’ becomes manifest at the end of the century, as it turns from a language of universal social ethics to that of identity politics. The ‘common life’ in Burke’s *Reflections* denotes a totality of lived experience under a civil society. Burke also describes the characteristics of ‘common life’ as the diversity of cultural form ‘according to the temper and circumstances of every community’.⁵² The keyword here is certainly ‘community’, which unites all ranks as an organic whole in order for the creative diversity to prosper. But it also suggests that the ambit of ‘common life’ must be circumscribed into a definite territory rather than expand indefinitely in the Humean manner whose ‘common life’ seems to encourage infinite extension of sociability in the ever-growing marketplace. From Chapter 2 to Chapter 4 and the Conclusion, I will identify some strands in the identity politics of ‘common life’: there is the ‘common life’ of civil society, the ‘common life’ of popular crowd, the ‘common life’ of the lower orders, the ‘common life’ of the elite, the ‘common life’ of rural England, and the ‘common life’ regional specificity (e.g. Ireland). The politics of humour depends largely on the kind of ‘common life’ different practitioners subscribe to.

1.3 The Contradictions of Comic Sociability

This section wants to point out that the discourse of (apolitical)

⁵² Burke, *Letter to the Sheriffs in Bristol*, in Warren M. Elofson, John A. Woods, and William B. Todd (eds), *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981-2015), 318.

disinterestedness, or humour for its own sake, in the eighteenth-century comic theory, is predicated on the conflicting formulations of social relation. The idea of innocent, disinterested or autotelic laughter rests on contradictory social imaginations. On the one hand, a pattern of social intercourse (in commercial society) reinforces individual boundary; on the other, humour as a diffusive conviviality breaks down that boundary into some sort of Bakhtinian collectivity in popular laughter.⁵³

The depoliticising move to aestheticize political antagonism into the ethos of sociability, I argue, effectively produces an alternative form of political conflict within the very discourse of comic sociability itself. I want here to unpack this tension by taking a look at the discourses of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Although both are categorised as offering a paradigm of the sociability of wit and humour, their reflections involve potentially incompatible social implications. Shaftesbury proposes ‘freedom of wit and humour’ to modernise social intercourse and urge unsociable egotist to communicate, but he is at the same time concerned that excessive freedom of laughter may degenerate into tyrannical selfhood. It should be pointed out at the outset that, revolting against Hobbesianism, as his philosophy can be seen to be, Shaftesbury’s conception of laughter has not completely gone beyond the ‘superiority’ model of laughing-at and fully attained the amiable communality of laughing-with. He does not discard altogether the sense of triumph in laughter: ‘I have taken liberty,

⁵³ For his view on laughter as an expression of the ‘grotesque’ that transgresses prescribed bodily and social boundary, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984). See also below, Chapter 2, p. 87.

you see, to laugh upon some occasions and, if I have either laughed wrong or been impertinently serious, I can be content to be laughed at in my turn. If contrariwise I am railed at, I can laugh still, as before, and with fresh advantage to my cause.’⁵⁴ Shaftesbury characterises the freedom of wit and humour as ‘a sort of amicable collision’ by which the company ‘polish one another and rub off our corners and rough sides’.⁵⁵ If the freedom to collide is not to attack but to ‘polish one another rub off our corners and rough sides’, then the function of wit and humour must be to determine and delimit proper individual boundaries. The dictate of liberty demands all subjects involved are free to attack in a proper manner: ‘A free conference is a close fight’.⁵⁶ The ‘fight’ here is a metaphor of civilised conflict materialised in the forms of ‘raillery, ‘ridicule’, ‘wit and humour’. Regulated in the framework of the select company of polite gentleman, the ‘fight’ of laughter progressively refines manners. This aggressive freedom of raillery, in other words, is paradoxically a method of regulation, operating on the dynamic balance of power, that is, the mutual openness to attack in the social circle in order to restrain each other’s selfhood.

Francis Hutcheson, usually identified as the philosophical successor to Shaftesbury, puts forwards his version of comic sociability, which, ironically, includes a social vision incompatible with Shaftesbury’s. In his three letters on laughter in 1725, later published together as *Reflections upon Laughter* (1750), Hutcheson begins in a quite faithfully Shaftesburyan manner by refuting

⁵⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 68.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 34.

Hobbesian superiority as an obstacle to sociable amiability. But while Shaftesbury stops at intersubjective raillery, Hutcheson goes one step further by pointing out that wit and humour do not even need a human object.⁵⁷ Richard Terry describes it as ‘victimless’ humour.⁵⁸ In this gesture away from personal satire, a contrary social vision is thus derived:

Laughter, like other affections, is very contagious; our whole frame is so sociable, that one merry countenance may diffuse cheerfulness to many; nor are they all fools who are apt to laugh before they know the jest, however curiosity in wise men may restrain it, that their attention may be kept awake. We are disposed by laughter to a good opinion of the person who raises it, if neither ourselves nor our friends are made the butt. Laughter is none of the smallest bonds of common friendships, tho’ it be of less consequence in great heroic friendships.⁵⁹

Both the Shaftesbury’s intersubjective public spirit and Hutcheson’s victimless benevolence can be regarded as discourse of disinterestedness, but it is in this common ground a fundamental tension is revealed. Hutcheson here presents a striking contradiction to the Shaftesbury’s model, in which liberal intersubjectivity reinforces individual boundaries. Perhaps less disposed than Shaftesbury to the doctrine of politeness, Hutcheson, in this respect at least, goes

⁵⁷ Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon The Fable of the Bees* (Glasgow: Daniel Baxter, 1750).

⁵⁸ Richard Terry, *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper: An English Genre and Discourse* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2005), ch. 8.

⁵⁹ Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter*, 27.

in the opposite direction while developing Shaftesbury's philosophy of anti-egoism. Unlike most eighteenth-century theorists, Hutcheson's idea of laughter is more fully committed to his benevolism and to communal ethics of laughing-with, one that could break down individual boundary by the 'diffus[ion]' of laughter. Laughter becomes an ambivalent category in the polite discourse of wit and humour because it can materialise the tension within the discourse of sociability, which either relies on the Shaftesbury's dovetailing of individual space by checking egotism with wit and humour, or imagines the dissolution of individuality into the boundless, indefinite energy of laughter.

The contrary comic visions indicate the different social theories — the civil society of polite individuals and the 'contagious' collectivity — within the comic discourse. However, Hutcheson's comic aesthetic of contagion was not very typical. The eighteenth-century comic theory predominantly conforms to the regulatory public sphere suggested in the polite model in which the individual must know his bound. It is in this social model that the potentially socially disruptive 'humourist' and oddball 'characters' can be safely contained. This social configuration needed for the flourishing of 'humour' still finds a hyperbolic expression in the nineteenth century in William Hazlitt's paean for 'a nation of hobbyhorse' in his *Lecture on the English Comic Writers*. The notion of 'hobbyhorse', derived from Sterne's popularisation and reinvention, in *Tristram Shandy*, of George Cheyne's recommendation of private recreation as conducive to individual health in *English Malady*, rests on the idea of an idiosyncratic attachment to private, incommunicable activities. For Hazlitt, the

Georgian enclosure of land was the political condition for the nourishment of individual characters that enriches English comedy. Reciting the familiar Whig cant, Hazlitt writes that the ideal of freeborn Englishman was finally realised in the reign of George III. It was the private ownership of land, whereby the ‘whole surface of society appeared cut out into square enclosures and sharp angles, which extended to the dresses of the time, their gravel-walks, and clipped hedges. Each individual had a certain ground-plot of his own to cultivate his particular humours in, and let them shoot out at pleasure’. It guaranteed free private pursuits of their ‘hobbyhorses’, and ‘made the English character more truly English than perhaps at any other period’.⁶⁰ His overstatement that the reign of George III is ‘the age of hobbyhorses’ envisages an imaginary polity comprising an archipelago of private individuals, with the unpropertied multitude being excluded.⁶¹ Hazlitt’s comic imagination conspicuously rules out Hutcheson’s social aesthetics of contagion. I will suggest that this aesthetics of contagion is

⁶⁰ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1930-34), 6: 121-22. Hazlitt’s emphasis on English humour echoes Joseph Priestley, who writes that ‘The English, they say, have least of an [*sic*] uniform national character, on account of their liberty and independence, which enables every man to follow his own humour.’ Joseph Priestley, *Lectures on History, and General Policy* (Birmingham, 1788), 523.

⁶¹ Using Hazlitt’s revealing remark on the inseparability of property (through enclosure) and liberty (of private ‘hobbyhorses’), Judith Frank draws attention to the class dimension suppressed in the liberal discourse of comedy that promises more ‘democratic’ approaches to individuality. Frank goes on to argue that ‘comedy’, by emphasising the benevolent amiability that transcends satiric moral struggles, effectively renews the class hierarchy that legitimises the pursuit of the propertied while policing the boundary between the gentle and the unpropertied. Judith Frank, *Common Ground: Eighteenth-Century English Satiric Fiction and the Poor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 22-23, 24-26.

roughly the ideological unconscious in the eighteenth-century comic theory in the sense that it can be in dangerous proximity to the social anarchy of the unruly crowd. This ideological tension was only implicit here, but would become manifest in the 1790s, particularly in the controversy between Burke and the popular radicals to which I will elaborate in the next chapter.

The contradictory social imaginations enable us to read the political anxiety in the polite theory of humour in the eighteenth century. The demotic referent of common life provided by writers such as Johnson can raise ethical issues when used as materials of comedy. The class valence is also identified in Hume's frequent assimilation of 'common' to 'vulgar' and 'popular' and 'common life' with 'vulgar' experience.⁶² Eighteenth-century criticism maintains that humour is most productive in representing 'low life', which hints at a return to a certain extent to the Aristotelian theory of comic subjects, which is bound up with hierarchy. But to what extent can the 'vulgar' content of 'common life' be introduced into the polite discourse of comedy? In general, unsurprisingly, eighteenth-century discourse is eager to delimit the scope of 'common life' in a manner that does not unequivocally democratise comedy, but rather gentrifies it. This tendency is reflected in the concern for the decorum of comic language. Hugh Blair holds that the 'Style of Comedy ought to be pure, elegant, and lively, very seldom rising higher than the ordinary tone of polite conversation; and upon no occasion, descending into vulgar, mean, and gross expressions'.⁶³ Blair's

⁶² See Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 119, 203.

⁶³ Blair, *Lectures*, 3: 363.

criteria for comedy are certainly associated with the moralist tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, civic humanism, and the ethics of sociability.⁶⁴ The deviation from this comic norm is known as farce. For Beattie, comedy should not go beyond ‘life’, but farce can go further: ‘As to the style of farce, which is frequently blended with comedy; — it is purposely degraded below that of common life; or rather, it is the ridiculous language of common life made more ridiculous’.⁶⁵ For Campbell, ‘farce deserves not a place in the subdivision [of comedy], being at most but a kind of dramatic apologue, whereof the characters of monstrous, the intrigues unnatural, the incidents often impossible, and which, instead of humour, has adopted a spurious bantling called *fun*’.⁶⁶ ‘Fun’, as an idea of autotelic pleasure (in the ‘monstrous’), may recall Mikhail Bakhtin’s characterisation of the popular carnival ‘for laughter’s sake’, ‘for amusement’s sake’ or ‘for its own sake’ in celebration of the grotesque.⁶⁷ Patently, Campbell’s concern for comic propriety reflects the eighteenth century’s polite effort to eliminate these elements of popular festival and to sublimate popular jest culture into the controlled cultural institution of the polite.⁶⁸ For Campbell

⁶⁴ For these Scottish intellectual contexts about virtue in commercial society, see again John Dwyer’s *Virtuous Discourse*.

⁶⁵ Beattie, *Ludicrous Composition*, 211.

⁶⁶ Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 71.

⁶⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5, 173, 183, 192, 208.

⁶⁸ See, in particular, Paulson’s argument that the eighteenth-century jest-book constitutes the institutionalisation of popular oral jest culture. Paulson, *Popular and Polite Art*, 70. One may also recall Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s argument that the establishment of the gentle culture of the bourgeoisie involves its dissociation from popular culture. Stallybrass and White,

and Beattie, farce represents a pointless energy, breaking its link with practical reality and indulging in mindless, idle practice. Campbell's contempt for the idea of 'fun' indicates the polite cultural elite's reservations about comedy's self-elevation into pleasure for its own sake.

Therefore, comedy for autotelic pleasure can dwell either in the polite and the popular context, but in the polite theory it is only permissible under a highly regulated and circumscribed horizon of social experience. As a signifier of the experience of the 'bulk of the people', 'common life' as the province of comedy also serves as a regulatory horizon in case the autotelic element of comedy, the 'fun' of it, should dangerously indulge vulgar pleasures that know no bounds. Carefree pleasure can be more politically dangerous than politically committed activity. I shall return to this theme in Chapter 2 on the aesthetic of transmission in radical laughter that extends beyond the ambit of the polite version of 'common life', and again in Chapter 3, on the controversy over Wolcot's vindication of free laughter.

This distinction between comedy and farce also reflects the concern of the cultural elite about the presence of low comedy in various scenes of life in Georgian Britain. Vic Gatrell accounts for late-century graphic satire, characterised by the ethically neutral celebration of urban dynamics and vitality, the pleasurable chaos in urban traffic, tumult, boisterous social gathering and the

The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), ch.

unruly crowd.⁶⁹ These acts of libidinal laughter clash with the artificial polishing of ‘wit’ and the ‘humour’ of polite virtue. A paradox, if not an irony, in the polite theory of comedy is that ‘common life’ is not as much a practical fact as a moral value to be protected against the onslaught of unproductive vulgarisation such as farce.

To redeem the idea of common life from its vulgar generic variation, ‘comedy’, in dramatic discourse, was conceived in a sense to winnow out its chaotic, low, farcical abuses and impurities. Moralism thinkers were particularly eager to circumscribe the scope and purify the language of comedy. To identify ‘comedy’ with the representation of ‘common life’ reflects the mimetic as well as moral orthodoxy of eighteenth-century criticism. ‘Common life’, being a sphere of social mixing and mingling, should be carried out by the innocuous comic tone in ‘conversation’. This existential sphere is where potential social conflict can be sublimated into comic productivity by turning otherwise unsociable oddities into humourism. Beattie writes that ‘The laughable peculiarities that distinguish Don Quixote, Parson Adams, Sir Roger de Coverley, Squire Western, and many other heroes of the Comic Romance, are such as men could not be supposed to acquire, if they did not live secluded in some degree from the general intercourse of society.’⁷⁰ The partial seclusion of the humourist, one can argue, provides a certain aesthetic distance that prevents direct conflict with society in order to create a dynamic for comic production. By concentrating

⁶⁹ Gatrell, *City of Laughter* (London: Atlantic, 2006).

⁷⁰ Beattie, *Ludicrous Composition*, 431.

on the 'manners of individuals' (rather than their values and belief systems and their way of life), Beattie effectively neutralises political contradictions.⁷¹ Yet such neutralizing manoeuvre generates its own political and social contradiction within the discourse of 'common life'. The mix and mingling of individuals in everyday social scene is ambivalent between distinction and chaos: 'common life' delimits a concrete existential horizon of practical community in which socially cultivated, temperamentally distinct personalities can be discerned and secured. But the flipside of such social form, the social mixture that may eventually amount to the effacement or indiscernibility of individuality and becomes chaotically homogenously, can sometimes threaten the civil framework of 'common life' itself.

For the 'polite' intellectuals, in order to regulate comic practice, it is necessary to polish the individual faculty of perception and judgement of humour to balance pleasure and rationality. The danger of comedy includes not only the potential anarchy encouraged by autotelic indulgence in mirth and laughter without moral restraint, but also its indiscretion, which can imply the obscuration of difference, and the obliteration of character. 'Wit' and 'humour' were much appreciated because they reflect the variety and inventiveness of language and the diversity of culture; they were feared for their apparent flipside, the confusion and relativisation of value. Shaftesbury raised an early 'polite' concern about the indiscriminate indulgence of wit and humour: 'The vulgar, indeed, may swallow any sordid jest, any mere drollery or buffoonery, but it must be a finer and truer

⁷¹ Ibid.

wit which takes with the men of sense and breeding'. It is this 'sense and breeding' that distinguishes men from the collective vulgar as possessing true character.⁷²

Generally, following Addison's insistence on the inseparability of wit and judgement, eighteenth-century polite discourse raised concern over the decorum of humour. 'Taste' is the term to establish a meritocratic criterion of comic judgement. As Alexander Gerard, fellow philosopher of Beattie and George Campbell at the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, and early expounder of the incongruity theory, puts it, '[i]n our enumeration of the simple powers which constitute taste, we must not omit that sense, which perceives, and is gratified by the odd, the ridiculous, the humourous, the witty . . . It has a province'. For Gerard, the special faculty of perceiving and producing delightful incongruity is as distinct as other 'tastes' and 'senses' and requires a separate account.⁷³ Mark Akenside notes that comic incongruity 'aid[s] the tardy steps of Reason'.⁷⁴ Much of Henry Fielding's *Covent-Garden Journal* is dedicated to rectifying taste against the pollution from the vulgar print culture; in this vein, he has likened the discretion and appreciation of wit and humour to the tasting of wine.⁷⁵ Kames, upon reflecting on ridicule as a test of truth, concedes that such a test requires a distinct mental faculty outside reason: 'Reasoning, as observed, cannot be

⁷² Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 8.

⁷³ Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 66-74 (66).

⁷⁴ See above, p. 25.

⁷⁵ *Covent-Garden Journal*, no. 18 (3 Mar. 1752), in Bertrand A. Goldgar (ed.), *The Covent-Garden Journal; and, a Plan of the Universal Register-Office* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 132.

applied. And therefore the only means is to judge by taste. The test of ridicule which separates from its artificial connections, exposes it naked with all its improprieties. . . . We have better leave nature to her own operation.’ For Kames, ‘ridicule’ falls into the similar aesthetic category as the sublime and the beautiful.⁷⁶ The early Thomas Holcroft writes in his *Wit’s Magazine* (1784) that ‘Wit, like ghosts of old, is only visible to a few individuals: it is a meteor that gleams over the heaven of the imagination with a thousand variegated and astonishing rays; and which, if not caught by the mind’s eye, instantly disperses into darkness’.⁷⁷ Holcroft’s words register two points: first, the sensibility of ‘wit’ serves to capture the diversity of imaginative activities (‘a thousand variegated and astonishing rays’). Second, to capture this diversity, a special faculty is needed, which is only available to the few. This implies that the comic sensibility is perhaps restricted to the capable elite, for, in Campbell’s words, ‘the witty and the humourous’ is perceived and produced by ‘taste’, for ‘they are of so subtle a nature, that they will hardly endure to be touched, much less to undergo a strict analysis and scrutiny. They are like those volatile essences,

⁷⁶ Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (Edinburgh, 1762), 2: 55-56. Kames appears convinced that the comic sensibility is *sui generis* and cannot be approached otherwise: ‘No person doubts that our sense of beauty is the true test of what is beautiful, and our sense of grandeur, of what is great or sublime. Is it more doubtful whether our sense of ridicule be the true test of what is ridiculous? It is not only the true test, but indeed the only test. For this is a subject that comes not, more than beauty or grandeur, under the province of reason. If any subject, by the influence of fashion or custom, have [*sic*] acquired a degree of veneration or esteem to which naturally it is not intitled [*sic*], what are the proper means for wiping off the artificial colouring, and displaying the subject in its true light?’. See also my discussion of Elizabeth Hamilton, Chapter 4, pp. 249-50.

⁷⁷ Thomas Holcroft, Preface to *The Wit’s Magazine* (London: Harrison, 1784), iii.

which, being too delicate to bear the open air, evaporate almost as soon as they are exposed to it.’⁷⁸ If wit and humour defy ‘strict analysis and scrutiny’, they probably cannot be acquired but are simply possessed as an intrinsic ability by few.

This meritocratic attitude serves to preserve polite morality against vulgar autotelic farce. As we have seen, conceptions of comic amusement are caught between regulative and productive sociability and its potential crumbling into unsociable individuality or civil disorder. If the ‘aesthetic’ attitude of comedy, so to speak, encourages a dangerous collapse of political control, it is another aesthetic category such as ‘taste’ that brings comedy back under control. Campbell and Beattie, in establishing the polite discourse on humour, believe that a good humourist should develop a particular sense or taste in order to produce true humour.⁷⁹ Hugh Blair, in line with the culture of politeness, holds that the comedian must be regulated by ‘nature and good taste’ to avoid extravagance.⁸⁰ Surely, ‘true humour’ in the polite conception is attained by discernment, a faculty capable of telling difference and perceiving the incongruous rather than indulging in the chaos of indiscriminate conviviality. Therefore, the objective is to draw a boundary between polite individuality and pervasive, indiscreet laughter that dangerously denies individual boundaries.

⁷⁸ Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 47.

⁷⁹ See Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*; Beattie, *Essay on Laughter*, *passim*. Beattie suggestively joint-published his *Essay on Ludicrous Composition* and the *Essay on Poetry and Music*, which, as his contemporary critics recognised, was influential in shaping literary taste.

⁸⁰ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Belles Lettres* (1783), 368.

I shall sum up the points in this chapter with a detailed reading of Beattie's comic theory in *Essay on Ludicrous Composition* (first edition in 1776). In this ambitious book, Beattie sets out to provide a comprehensive theory that encompasses the diversity of comic incongruities. He affirms Hutcheson's effort to do away with Hobbes's legacy and his pioneering speculation on incongruity theory. He is nonetheless dissatisfied with Hutcheson's relatively simple formulation of the grammar of humour as the incongruity produced by the juxtaposition of grandeur and meanness, and he produces a long list of various types of incongruity and their rigorous definitions and differentiations, including pun, paronomasia, mock-epic, parody, burlesque and many other modes of 'ludicrous composition'.

Beattie is dedicated to dispensing with Aristotle and Hobbes to broaden the critical inquiry into humour. But in order to address the richness of incongruity, Beattie somewhat ironically makes many rigorous qualifications to circumscribe the scope of his inquiry. He attempts to theorise the sources of 'innocent' amusement distinct from satirical genres and the topics that partake of moral solemnity. He discards the ancient Aristotelian theory of comedy as an imitation of 'vices and meanness', which partake of the ridiculous that provokes moral contempt rather than innocent amusement. According to Beattie, the 'ludicrous' differs from the 'ridiculous' in the sense that the latter is contaminated with the morally reprobate while the former induces 'pure laughter'.⁸¹ For Beattie, the aesthetic character of comedy is only approvable insofar as it is productive to

⁸¹ Beattie, *Ludicrous Composition*, 302.

polite learning. The vice of the person laughed at could be dangerously and unjustly written off if it is made the ‘subject of mere pleasantry and amusement’. A satirical contempt, then, has to be at work in such moral circumstance. ‘Downright wickedness’, for instance, ought not to be the subject of comedy.⁸² Beattie’s words reveal misgivings about comedy’s indefinite scope in practice. He expresses elsewhere his scepticism about the comedy of Sterne and Smollett, which in his judgment often tends towards laughter for laughter’s sake.⁸³ Symptomatically, Beattie stresses the need to enforce the generic demarcation between ‘satire’ and ‘comedy’. He subcategorises satire into the ‘comic’ and the ‘serious’, respectively ridiculing ‘human foibles’ and ‘vices and crimes’. He considers ‘comic satire’ an oxymoron and regrets its popularity.⁸⁴ Beattie’s friend Campbell adds that ‘the edge of ridicule [cannot] strike with equal force every species of misconduct: it is not the criminal part which it attacks, but that which we denominate silly or foolish.’⁸⁵ For Beattie and Campbell, ‘vice’ is the subject of satire, while ‘folly’ is that of comedy.⁸⁶

Beattie argues effectively that diversity is only good when it promotes distinction and judgement rather than confusion. In other words, the ludicrous is diverse, but one has to learn not to laugh at anything. For Beattie, only the persons cultivated with the perceptive faculty of true ludicrous incongruity can

⁸² Ibid, 393.

⁸³ Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, 1783), 177.

⁸⁴ Beattie, *Ludicrous Composition*, 394.

⁸⁵ Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 69.

⁸⁶ Cf. Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 68: ‘Enormous vice, though of all things incongruous to the natural system of our mind, is never esteemed ridiculous’.

grasp its diversity. A cultivated sensibility for wit and humour is the same thing as aesthetic education:

The more we are accustomed to any set of objects, the greater delicacy of discernment we acquire in comparing them together, and estimating their degree of excellence. By studying many pictures one may become a judge of painting; by attending to the ornaments and proportions of many buildings, one acquires a taste in architecture. . . . In like manner, by being conversant in works of wit and humour, and by joining in polite conversation, we refine our taste in ridicule, and come to undervalue those homelier jokes that entertain the vulgar.’⁸⁷

The ‘taste’ for wit and humour becomes the new criterion for hierarchy, which is predicated now on the distinction between ‘polite’ and ‘vulgar’, rather than on the ‘superiority’ of Hobbesian laughter. For Beattie, the cultivation of ‘taste’ of humour, of which only a learned gentleman is capable, aims for a comprehensive grasp of the diversity of practice. Effectively, Beattie’s incongruity theory amounts to a case for cultural meritocracy. On the other hand, the conversation of the ‘common people’ for Beattie does not show the ability to distinguish differences in experience, which is essential for cultivating the taste for truly ludicrous incongruities. The commoners

 speak and look what they think, bluster and threaten when they are angry,
 affect no sympathies which they do not feel, and when offended are at no
 pains to conceal their dissatisfaction. They laugh when they perceive

⁸⁷ Beattie, *Ludicrous Composition*, 404.

anything ludicrous, without much deference to the sentiments of their company; and, having little relish for delicate humour, because they have been so little used to it, they amuse themselves with such pleasantry as in the higher ranks of life would offend by its homeliness'.⁸⁸

For Beattie, their 'pleasantry' is pleasantry for its own sake, lacking moral scrupulousness, which results from indiscriminate laughter. Although cast in terms of class, Beattie's reflections effectively suggest two kinds of social imaginaries based on the two laughing cultures — the society of difference and that of sameness and indiscrimination. These critical manoeuvres betray anxiety about the crowd, often envisaged as the identical collective, in contrast to an individualised society in which individual characters are discernable.⁸⁹

Beattie's critical misgiving reveals the ambivalence of the function of humour that encourages conviviality and spices up communal life, but can at the same time be dangerously anarchic for the conservative-minded. His anxiety lies in the tension of two kinds of pleasure: the pleasure that is securely lodged in a regulated community and transforms political conflict into aesthetic amusement on the one hand, and the pleasure of bereft of meaning, the 'vulgar' pleasure of 'fun'. Beattie distinguishes between two kinds of laughter: 'animal' and

⁸⁸ Ibid, 405.

⁸⁹ As Addison puts it in his attack on the 'False Humourists' who laugh with no moral principle at the ludicrous 'only for the sake of being so', the prevalence of false humour justifies his temporary flight from amiability, 'the only Exception which I shall make to the General rule I have prescribed myself, of *attacking multitudes*'. Addison, *Spectator*, 'No. 35', 1: 148. Addison elsewhere describes 'multitudes' as an 'undistinguish'd . . . promiscuous Heap of Matter.' Addison, 'No. 26', *Spectator*, 1: 110.

‘sentimental’ laughter. ‘Animal’ laughter is that physiological act of laughing, driven by ‘animal impulse’. Therefore it is prone to excess and uncontrollability, displaying indecency and coarseness. Hutcheson’s confidence in natural laughter as a spontaneous expression of benevolence is here absent in Beattie. On the other hand, ‘sentimental’ laughter manages to correspond with a mental state of pleasing emotion. It should be ‘the effect of good humour, complacency, tender affection’.⁹⁰ For Beattie, ‘sentimental laughter’ represents the authentic expression of inner gaiety, in contrast to the forced expression of mirth. It is a fusion of outward sign and inward reality, an unaffected expression in exact proportion to the actual mirth. Beattie seeks to regulate laughter as an organic flow from a well-orchestrated comic atmosphere, prepared by a cultivated taste for the incongruous. Otherwise, it would degenerate into a noisy material surplus of ‘animal laughter’ that does not correspond to comic taste and therefore risks evolving into an act for no identifiable purpose.

Beattie’s comic criticism is predicated on the conflict between diversity and sameness, and that between civilisation and chaos, revealing his anxiety about the contradiction within the comic social theory that could simultaneously promote polite regulation and popular contagion. It is important to note that Beattie enthuses about the superiority of ‘modern’ humour over the ‘ancient’ one. This is because, he asserts, the modern epoch is blessed with the accumulation and sophistication of political institution and social custom, which supply copious materials that are ever increasingly productive of comic incongruities. It

⁹⁰ Beattie, *Essay on Ludicrous Composition*, 304-06.

is this sophisticated (and, through Beattie does not spell out, commercial) civilisation of developed customs and manners that produces the rich array of comic literary characters such as Quixote, Squire Western, Uncle Toby, Parson Adams and Sir Roger de Coverley, along with real-life characters including the ‘conjurer, the politician, the man of humour, the critic; the seriousness of the moralist, and the mock dignities of the astrologer; the vivacities and the infirmities peculiar to old age’.⁹¹ These types of individuals ‘are all so blended and contrasted in the censor of Great Britain, as to form a character equally complex and natural, equally laughable and respectable’.⁹² The sumptuous present is superior to the meagre past. It attests the achievement of civilisation, according to Beattie, which is occasionally threatened by the chaos and anarchy of animal laughter. Monarchy is preferable to the republic because, as Beattie here anticipates Hazlitt, it secures ‘private business and private amusement’.⁹³ The ‘savage’, more liable to violent activities and emotions, cannot enjoy ‘[w]it, humour and those nicer improvements’ available only in a peaceful political system such as that of modern Britain.⁹⁴ Also, Beattie’s dissertation shows how far the polite theory of humour is distant from the culture of the jest-book. Most of Beattie’s textual examples are from canonical poetry, with almost none from the jest-book. His conspicuous wish to wean off the popular sources of ludicrous composition shows in his effort to sublimate the comic raw materials into polite

⁹¹ Ibid, 431, 356.

⁹² Ibid, 356.

⁹³ Ibid, 445.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

learning acquired by ‘taste’, and perhaps to stave off demotic anarchy that could wipe out the diversity in ‘common life’.

Beattie’s understanding, that ‘comedy’ needs a developed social and civil foundation, is at the heart of the political controversy over the practice of humour in the 1790s. The comedy of ‘common life’ as an allegory of British civil society plunged into crisis in the wake of the Revolutionary events, especially that of the conduct of the crowd. I argue that comic modes of expression in the 1790s became not only a rhetorical device but also a locus of political controversy because its existential horizon of ‘common life’ ceased to be the ready, inexhaustible source of comic incongruity and became a contested category as well as an endangered realm of social experience. Edmund Burke asserts that the French threat was precisely the encroachment of ‘common life’. The next three chapters will discuss how ‘common life’ contributes to shape political controversies. I argue in Chapter 2 that, for Burke, the eclipse of ‘common life’ that marks the triumph of mob politics can be read as the degeneration of the comic genre from the regulatory aesthetics within civil framework into the anarchic laughter of the crowd. The popular radical counter-vision of laughter, on the other hand, is less reflective of the available ‘common life’ than constitutive of a common life on a new collective and co-operative basis of social relation. Chapter 3 discusses John Wolcot’s portrayal of George III as a comic character in common life, which provoked controversy among his loyalist critics over its subversive potential of ‘leveling’. Chapter 4 reads the comic anti-Jacobin novels to explicate ‘common life’ as a powerful ideological component of

counter-revolutionary polemics against the radical theory of perfectibility and the threat of the popular anarchy.

Chapter 2

The Contestation over ‘Common Life’ from Burke’s Critique of Comedy to the Humour of Popular Radicalism

Burke’s *Reflection on the Revolution in France*, a seminal text in defence of the civil society against the rising radical discourse of natural rights of men in the wake of the October Days, is particularly acute about what was at stake on both sides of the Channel that was deeper than simply a change in regime or political system. Castigating not only Price’s dubious interpretation of the political principle of 1688 but also the facile subversion of the social fabric by the French Revolution and, Burke emphatically situates ‘common life’ in the civil society based on a balance between a holistic political framework and local customs and communities. As Burke articulates in the famous dictum on the revolutionary theory in *Reflections*: ‘These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are, by the laws of nature, refracted from their straight line.’¹ Burke holds that the political questions of the 1790s encompass far more than the regime change: it involves a revolution in manner and approach to ‘common life’. Burke insists that the political framework and the entirety of lived experience are inseparable. In doing so,

¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell and William B. Todd, in Paul Langford (gen. ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 9 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981-2015), 8: 112. All references to Burke, unless otherwise specified, are to this edition, given in the main text with volume and page numbers.

Burke differs markedly from the opposition between civil society and the state as ‘necessary evil’ in the Paine of *Common Sense* in 1776 and the French Déclaration of 1789.² *Reflections* argues that ‘common life’ depends on government as the institution of provision of needs rather than restraint of freedom. Without it, society will be overturned and there will be no ‘common life’ to speak of. For Burke, the theory of the universal rights of men threatened to undermine the social structure that produces the complexity of lived experience. In the broadest sense, particularly in Burke’s description of a comprehensive ‘dense medium’ of all aspects of civil social being, ‘common life’ appears to mean the sum of quotidian lived experience. In the very least, Burke’s caution in *Reflection* against the assault on ‘common life’ by revolutionary ‘abstract’ theory reiterates the British empiricism and utilitarian practicality.³ At most, as I will explain, this move reveals Burke’s profound distrust of popular politics in which the crowd’s anarchic approach would threaten to dismantle the sophisticated system of social relation that constitutes the fabric of ‘common life’.

Edmund Burke’s notorious phrase ‘swinish multitude’, which describes the

² For contrast between Burke and *Common Sense* on government, see e.g. David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 268-73; for the contrast between Burke and the French Déclaration, see F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 2: 317-19.

³ For the tradition of the British disposition to privilege practicality over ‘theory’, in which Burke plays a vital part, see David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See also Chapter 4, Sec. 1.

unruly behaviour of the crowd in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, expresses the conservative rejection of its political subjectivity of the crowd. But where political subjectivity is denied by the conservatives, there, ironically, an ideal locus is offered to the radicals to reinvent it. This is precisely the case when the sometimes alarmist, more than derisive, tone of the conservatives displays anxiety that the politically disenfranchised are making their way towards an illegitimate enfranchisement. The radicals promptly turn this insult into a compliment with numerous witty and humorous rejoinders and satires, the shared themes of which are a main topic of this chapter.⁴

The critical interest in popular radical literature, in the works of Iain McCalman, David Worrall, Jon Mee, James Epstein, Gillian Russell, Kevin Gilmartin, John Barrell, Michael Scrivener, and Ian Haywood, among others, has emphasised the protean, innovative and sometimes illegitimate mix of communicative mediums and modes of expression in order to create new zones of political engagement beyond the political establishment. I have mentioned that this critical paradigm is established in the conviction articulated by Jon Mee and John Barrell about the inadequacy of the idea of formal ‘debate’ to characterise Revolution controversy and the experimental languages and ideology that sought

⁴ For a survey of the popularity of the phrase ‘swinish multitude’, see Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton, 1998), ch. 12. Radicals who accept it as a compliment include Daniel Isaac Eaton, Thomas Spence, James Parkinson, John Thelwall, and a number of unsigned pamphlets, e.g. [Sharpe, J.], *A Rhapsody, to E[dmund] B[urke], Esq. . . . Ornamented with a Humorous Print, of ‘The Svinish Multitude’* (Sheffield: J. Crome, 1792); [Anon.], *A Tribute to the Swinish Multitude: Being a Choice Collection of Patriotic Songs. Collected by the Celebrated R. Thomson* (London; New York: reprinted by Samuel Loudon and Son, 1795).

to redefine political life.⁵ This critical approach has extensively tackled the radical expressions, which employ the diversity of polemical strategies from formal arguments to the figurative and performative pragmatics of rituals, symbolism, theatre, popular print culture, and humour. These modes of expression, essential to the politicisation of otherwise disenfranchised or illegitimate spheres of cultural practice, were also essential to the broadening of the scope of struggle and production of alternative public spheres in response to the new political condition.⁶

This chapter revisits the dispute between Burke and his popular radical lampooners to situate popular radical humour in its ideological framework. I argue that the dispute between Burke and the popular radicals in the first half of the 1790s can be viewed as a crisis — if not the collapse — of the eighteenth-century discursive paradigm of the social theory of comedy. Burke's early reflections on comedy, and his choice to dwell on tragedy when he observes that the social condition for comedy is jeopardised, provide an

⁵ See Introduction.

⁶ McCalman, Iain, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (New York: Harvester, 1992); James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); John Barrell, "'An Entire Change of Performance?'" The Politicisation of Theatre and the Theatricalisation of Politics in the Mid 1790s', *Lumen*, 17 (1998), 11-50; Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics, and the People, 1790-1860* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

ideological framework for Paine and the popular radicals to develop their alternative vision of transmission, solidarity and popular subjectivity. By revisiting Burke and radical counter-polemics, I want to modify some customary approaches in which Burke and the radicals are contrasted. First, Burke's powerful political aesthetics of tragic theatre seems to have obscured his views on the comic genre — an aspect that has been commonly neglected in scholarship. I will dedicate a few pages to explaining Burke's idea of decorum of comedy, which, according to him, was vulgarised, along with tragedy, in the events of the Revolution. Secondly, the contrast between Burke and Paine tends to be formulated as one between tragic theatre based on collective sympathy and comic theatre based on emotionally detached, rational spell-breaking and comic deflation. The pages that follow will reconsider this dichotomy by reading the way in which feeling is affirmed, rather than discredited, by Paine's alternative imagination of feeling through the aesthetics of bathos and laughter. Thirdly, Burke's 'theatre' as mass education and political control is generally understood as an allegory for social hierarchy, while its radical counter-theatre is concerned with the inversion of hierarchy that turns the world upside down.⁷ This vertical social metaphor, although otherwise sensible, appears to me to obscure some other dimensions in the figure of theatre in Burkean and radical discourses. In fact, as I will explain in detail, the radical counter-theatre, and Thomas Paine's

⁷ Frans de Bruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 185-88. Burke regards revolutionary comedy as baleful because, as de Bruyn puts it, 'the traditional reconciliation of opposing forces with which comedy concludes is shattered by a revolutionary conception of comedy which promises to make permanent the inversions of hierarchy that traditional comedy provisionally enacts' (187-88).

famous metaphor of ‘the open theatre of the world’ in particular, entertains horizontal, expansive and diffusive political aesthetics.

2.1 Burke’s Political Ethics of Theatre and Comedy

In addressing Burke’s views on comedy, the following account seeks to caution against the misleading implication that Burke’s recourse to the tragic muse in his construction of an allegory of political order unsubtly rejects its comic counterpart, which is alleged to bespeak of disorder, or that his figure of tragic theatre leaves no space for comedy. Albeit in a distinctive manner, comedy, as well as tragedy, provides allegories of manner, moral education, community and social order. The degeneration of the comic genre embodied in the Revolutionary turbulence, I will suggest in this section, informs Burke’s defensive retreat into the tragic genre. As I will unpack in the following pages, Burke’s view on comedy does not allow chaos as a source of pleasure. Thus he railed against the revolutionary chaos, which he compared to the adulteration of the dramatic genre in ‘tragicomedy’.⁸

Though his views on comedy cannot be found in his writings of the 1790s, and have to be traced far back to his early years of literary journals, Burke did provide theses and articulate reflections with regard to the decorum of comedy. For instance, a series of articles in *The Reformer* (1748), a weekly journal edited

⁸ See some useful discussions in Paul Hindson and Tim Gray, *Burke’s Dramatic Theory* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1988), 131-42; Frans de Bruyn, *Literary Genres*, 185-88; David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 187-91.

by the young Burke, criticised the degradation, the ‘dulness’ of Dublin’s Theatre Royal. Although the author may or may not have been Burke himself, its themes and concerns certainly anticipated Burke’s reflections in the 1790s.⁹ The author assails the moral degradation of contemporary comedy by making laughter a self-legitimizing hedonism. He laments the decline of contemporary Dublin’s cultural life, epitomised in the chaos of theatre: the taste is vulgarised, the moral function of plays ignored, the decorum of authentic comedy eroded by the vogue of sentimental comedy, and the theatre etiquette debased. He claims that the ‘true End of Comedy was, by ridiculing the Follies, and Vices of Men, to make them ashamed of them’, and ‘by observing the growing Follies of the Age they live in . . . [to] nip them in the Bud’ (1: 113). In his *Hints for an Essay on the Drama* (1761) Burke reiterates comedy’s moral function by defining it as a ‘satirical poem’, and claims to follow Aristotle’s idea of comedy which, according to Burke’s understanding, ‘represent[s] an action carried on by dialogue, to excite laughter by describing ludicrous characters’ (1: 559). But modern comedy has turned its back on its moral duty, making comic plays ‘abound with Characters insipidly imperfect, where Virtue is painted in an unnatural, and consequently an unamiable manner’ (ibid). Burke’s complaint suggests that in contemporary comedy virtues were held in suspense, laughter became its own moral, and characters rejoiced in the grotesque and ‘unnatural’.

Burke’s sense of the decorum of drama appears to fall into the

⁹ For a bibliographical headnote regarding its editorship and authorship, see *Writings*, vol. 1. 65-66. The author of these particular pieces could be Burke or his collaborator Beaumont Brenan, a playwright.

eighteenth-century paradigm. Some of his views on drama show the influence from his friend and fellow Irishman, the playwright Arthur Murphy, whose reflections on the comic genre and the nature of wit and humour, in particular, are also much in line with the polite discourse of Addison, Fielding, Corbyn Morris, George Campbell and Beattie. For Murphy, the value of both comedy and tragedy lies in its imagination and development of character in this province: ‘The Comic Writer, as well as the Tragedian, must derive his Force from the true primary Sources of Composition, that is to say, he must learn to seize our Imaginations, with striking Pictures of common Life; he must instruct our Reason by inserting sensible Observations on human Contingencies, and he must frequently apply himself to those Passions which it is the Merit of his Art to awaken.’¹⁰ Likewise, Burke believes that comedy’s subject matter resides in the ‘manners’ and ‘sentiments’ of ‘common affairs and common life’ (1: 560). For Burke, drama is a mimetic art that recreates the characters, manners and passions; and comedy, as Burke remains faithfully within the contemporary critical paradigm, finds its subjects in the ludicrous circumstances of common life.

According to Murphy, both tragedy and comedy aim to excite ‘passions’:

¹⁰ [Charles Ranger] (Arthur Murphy), *Gray’s Inn Journal* (London: W. Faden and J. Bouquet, [1754?]), 291. Cf. a minor change of phrasing in the 1756 edition: ‘The Comic, as well as the Tragic Writer, must derive his Force from the true primary Sources of Composition; that is to say, he must learn to seize our Imaginations, with striking Pictures of human Life; he must instruct our Reason by inserting sensible Observations on worldly Contingencies, and he must also frequently apply himself to those Passions which it is the Merit of his Art to awaken.’ *Gray’s Inn Journal*, 2 vols. (Dublin: William Sleater, 1756), 2: 250.

the former terror and pity, the latter ‘gay contempt’.¹¹ Burke echoes this in his *Hints for an Essay on the Drama*, by defining ridicule of the ludicrous character as the principal subject matter and tonality of comedy. As a ‘satirical poem’, comedy serves as a negative moral lesson by offering counterexamples of ‘virtue and politeness’ (1: 559). Its subject dwells in a different province: the ordinary yet humorous ‘character’ of empirical life. The implicit hierarchy is further suggested, in an Aristotelian vein, that kings are ‘exempt through decency’ as comic subjects (ibid) and ‘virtue and politeness not proper for Comedy’ (1: 560). Burke’s understanding of the classical decorum of drama, it appears, subscribes to its class allegory: when it comes to the subject matters of dramatic genres, tragedy features the great, comedy the rest. Burke regards ‘nature’ as a chaotic plethora of existence, an irreducible mixture of ‘the great and the little, the serious and the ludicrous, things the most disproportionate the one to the other, are frequently huddled together in much confusion’ (1: 561). In confrontation of, so to speak, the mixture of the tragic and the comic, it falls to the lot of the poet and ‘art’ to find his or her way through that chaos, to select material to purify experience and to produce aesthetic effects in accordance with ‘propriety’. Realism is indecorous for the artistic portrayal of heroes: ‘An hero eats, drinks and sleeps like other men, but to introduce such scenes on the stage, because they are natural, would be ridiculous’ (Ibid). Burke’s disgust at the gleeful irreverence in the iconoclastic rituals against the political establishment in *Reflections* — particularly in revealing the French Queen as ‘but a woman . . . and an animal

¹¹ *Gray’s Inn Journal* [1754?], 290.

not of the highest order' (8: 128) — therefore, both reiterates his disapproval of the misplacement of a larger-than-life character in iconoclastic ridicule, and expresses his discontent of a culture that lapses from the aesthetic ordering of experience into enjoyment in the very chaos of experience.

Comedy in Burke materialises an aspect of cultural value founded on such social, moral and political framework that must be defended but was in danger of being eclipsed by the events of the Revolution. The Parisian crowd, in a sense, realises Burke's constant nightmare of the disregard of hierarchy, which comedy should not dispense with but rather preserve. Burke's ideal of the comic genre resides in his faith in the moral function of satire and in the human knowledge derived from its ridicule on the comically flawed character. In this sense, he is closer to the Shaftesburyan ideal that the practice of wit and humour is to produce self-regulated gentleman, not unrestrained self-indulgence. It has to do, among other things, with an understanding of human character. Both Burke and Murphy conform to the eighteenth-century critical paradigm and hold that the value of drama lies not so much in action as in character.¹² This principle conforms to the eighteenth-century predilection for 'comedy of character' and

¹² For Murphy's emphasis on character, see, for example, Arthur Murphy, *Gray's Inn Journal*, 94 (3 August 1754), 267: 'Aristotle was certainly mistaken when he called the Fable the Life and Soul of Tragedy; the Art of constructing the dramatic Story should always be subservient to the Exhibition of Character.' T. O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton believe the emphasis on character a rare argument in the dramatic theory the eighteenth century. See their headnote to *Hints for an Essay on the Drama*, ed. McLoughlin and Boulton, 1: 554.

applies to comedy in Burke.¹³ But what kind of character conforms to the comedic decorum? For Burke, ‘A character which has nothing extravagant, wrong, or singular in it, can affect but very little’ (1: 561). Burke’s emphasis on the singularity of character recalls the paradigmatic theory of the ‘humourist’. In his review of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* in the *Annual Register* (1760), Burke speaks of Walter Shandy precisely as a ‘humourist’: ‘The principal figure, old Shandy, is a humourist; full of good nature; full of whims; full of learning, which for want of being balanced by good sense, runs him into an innumerable multitude of absurdities, in all affairs of life, and disquisitions of science. A character well imagined; and not uncommon in the world’.¹⁴ This remark clearly concurs with the eighteenth-century relish for the ‘humourist’, which, though recalcitrant to social integration, is such a pleasurable and innocuous oddity that its incommunicability becomes something enjoyable.

It also shows that Burke’s view of humour and comedy in general agrees with the eighteenth-century critical tradition: the source of amusement is the singularity of character of the humourist, produced by the diversity in common life, yet at the same time at odds with its social rhythm. Burke’s comedy agrees with the mainstream of eighteenth-century polite discourse: predicated on existential assumptions of ‘common life’ constituted by sophisticated social relations, featuring a ‘humorist’ that illustrate the ubiquitous peculiarity of human nature, and as morally edifying and instructive as tragedy ought to be. Yet,

¹³ For the preference of the ‘comedy of character’ to the ‘comedy of intrigue’, see Chapter 1, p. 40.

¹⁴ [Edmund Burke], *Annual Register*, iii (1760), 247. See also Chapter 1.

as Burke argues in *Reflections*, the very horizon of ‘common life’ is jeopardised, its ‘dense medium’ of custom and institution being assault by revolutionary ‘metaphysics’. In this condition, the humour and laughter of the Revolutionary crowd cannot be qualified as components of a true comedy. Burke’s moral outrage should not be understood as a no-confidence vote on comedy as such, nor as a judgment of the irredeemable unruliness of the very nature of this genre, but as an act of mourning for its historic loss of generic propriety. Burke had disapproved of the invention of sentimental comedy (the ‘Weeping Comedy’), the mixture of laughter and tears, comic joy and tragic distress, as a ‘great fault of comedy’ (1: 112-13). This disgust reappears in his description of the ‘tragicomic scene[s]’ of the Revolution that ‘alternate contempt and indignation; *alternate laughter and tears*; alternate scorn and horror’ (1: 60; my italics). In other words, the eighteenth-century comedy, in which incongruous comic individual clashes with a practically regulative environment of ‘common life’ was, in the conservative eyes of the 1790s, being alarmingly eroded by the popular laughter as, in Bakhtinian terms, a carnivalesque activity.¹⁵

Burke had experienced this carnivalisation of the theatre in his early years. He complained in the *Reformer* that the audience’s clapping and hissing interrupted performance, threatening to undermine a polite civil society in miniature. ‘Every Person who goes to a Play, should endeavour to persuade himself, he sees some real Action, this one Consideration would put a Stop to impertinent Clapping, at least, to the End of the Scene. A thinking Audience

¹⁵ See Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*.

gives, and a judicious Actor receives, a profound Silence as the best Applause' (1: 81-82). In such silent communication, it is meaning that prevails. No outward sign needs to be performed, and the empty clamour of clapping and hissing are purged from that public sphere. It would be rather odd if Burke effectively recommended silence as the proper response to *any* kind of play, even including holding laughter when watching a comedy. At any rate, certainly, Burke does not want the flood of laughter to drown the theatre. Burke's instruction of the manner of the audience involves a moral division of labour in which the audience's task is passive reception. The profound silence in theatre functions to make communal feelings cohere by producing social ties. This reflection on theatre etiquette could be read as an allegory of a kind that is still at work decades later in the ideal civil society Burke defends in *Reflections*. The moral code of respect performed in this manner, moreover, which maintains the social distinction, leads to a paradox that respect for distinctions and boundaries in civil society can tie civil subjects together.

For Burke, the civic disorder reflected in forms of public performance in the Revolution indicates the collapse of such a moral code. *Reflections* describes the activities of the National Assembly that recall Burke's aversion to the unruly crowd and his early castigation of public disorder in arenas from the theatre to the coffeehouse and debating club. The French Revolutionaries act like 'the comedians of a fair before a riotous audience; they act amidst the tumultuous cries of a mixed mob of ferocious men, and of women lost to shame, who, according to their insolent fancies, direct, control, applaud, explode them . . .' (8:

119). While public piety and moderation are maintained in the ‘profound silence’ of private reflections, the cacophony of Revolutionary theatre renders the public a mess, and privacy eradicated. Burke’s epithets, with which he excoriates the Revolutionary turbulence and the measures of the National Assembly, include words related to comedy, rather than simply ‘comedy’. The Revolutionary events are dubbed a ‘farce’ (8: 119; 191), a ‘monstrous tragicomic scene’ (8: 60), their practitioners ‘comedians in a fair before a riotous audience’ (8: 119). Burke’s apprehension about French scenes became a reality in the mid-1790s in the English radical counter-theatre, which was abundant with pantomime, burlesque, public mock-political show, comic ephemera and all kinds of illegitimate cultural forms that pose as alternatives to the established theatre. Critics regard these cultural practices as ‘low comedy’, which Burke’s high tragedy allegedly rejects.¹⁶ As critically useful a term as this is, it may have some difficulty describing factually the polite and classical critical paradigm in the eighteenth century concerning what ‘comedy’ is. It implies that ‘comedy’ blankets a diversity of cultural practices of humour and laughter, which can obscure that, for Burke, ‘low comedy’ may be a contradiction in terms. It seems in Burke that ‘low’ comedy does not qualify as ‘comedy’ since true ‘comedy’ has to conform to a set of prescribed rules and ethics.

The only exception where Burke actually uses the word ‘comedy’ is when he sarcastically describes the policy of assignats, the bonds issued by the National Assembly of France and backed by the incomes of the confiscated

¹⁶ See Jon Mee, ‘The Political Showman at Home’, 45, 52.

church lands by the Assembly, as the panacea for all financial issues in the wake of the Revolution (8: 281). After mockingly repeating the word *assignat* twelve times, Burke attempts at humorous dog Latin to describes this farcical event in some mock-classical term:

Mais si maladie, opiniatria, non vult se garire, quid illi facere? assignare — postea assignare; ensuite assignare [‘But if the disease in opinion does not wish to cure itself, what's to be done? Issue *assignats* — and then more *assignats*; and yet more *assignats*.’] The word is a trifle altered. The Latin of your present doctors may be better than that of your old comedy; their wisdom, and the variety of their resources, are the same. (8: 281)

The repetitions of the phrase ‘issue assignats’ that describes the National Assembly’s uniform response to a long list of economic issues registers Burke’s derision of the Assembly’s inability to deal with the complexity of the national economy as an endangered fabric of the common life, which had been convincingly incarnated in the landed community of the Church. In a sense, the robotic repetition of ‘issue assignat’, which appears fifteen times in the passage, reads like the Bergsonian formula of comedy as ‘something mechanic encrusted upon the living’, as the homogenous language of the paper economy violently denies the complex concerns of national life. Burke is here giving an example of the ‘metaphysic . . . light’ of abstract solution aiming to penetrate into the ‘dense medium of common life’, which is doomed to fail (8: 112). Since ‘common life’, comedy’s natural province, is under revolutionary assault, the ‘comedy’ of *assignat* becomes its own vulgar parody. In a sense, this passage displays

conservative uncertainty, shared by counter-revolutionary novelists in my final chapter, about the role ‘comedy’ should take. The term ‘old comedy’ Burke uses to compare with the farce of assignat seems to confirm that Burke still abides by his early definition of ‘comedy’ as a trenchant satire. Yet the other paradigm of eighteenth-century comedy — the ‘amiable humourist’ in which moral and political pressure is suspended for autotelic pleasure — with which Burke appreciated *Tristram Shandy*, comes into conflict with this satiric variation, and is absent from Burke’s polemic. For Burke, as for the anti-Jacobin novelists, comedy as satire and comedy as entertainment appear to be in unresolvable tension with each other.

2.2 Social Totality, Pathetic Tragedy, and Radical Comedy

I have described Burke’s interpretation of Revolutionary politics as the disappearance, or corruption, of authentic comedy, as ‘common life’ is placed under siege by the crowd politics of the ‘swinish multitude’. Burke’s recourse to tragedy, I will argue, can be viewed as part of his project to repair the damaged horizon of ‘common life’. Only by fixing that social order can comedy be put into practice again. One of the methods is the reconstruction of social cohesion that relies on fellow feeling promoted in certain kind of tragic theatre. Christopher Reid identifies Burke’s inheritance of eighteenth-century sentimentalism, and shows that Burke privileges feminine pity over masculine awe and fear, or the beautiful over the sublime, as the central theme of his tragic

muse, which performs the much-needed function of social cohesion in a time of crisis.¹⁷ Otherwise brilliant, Reid's essay curiously makes a judgment apparently at odds with fact: the passage in which Burke recourses to tragic theatre as a moral instrument is preceded by a paragraph on the 'terror and pity' induced 'when kings are hurl'd from their thrones by the Supreme Director of this great drama' (8: 132). Certainly, tragic theatre is not confined to the feminine symbol of the French Queen. The tragic emotions of terror and pity, as respective representations of the sublime and the beautiful, are for Burke both essential in cementing the nation. Such emotions in response to momentous political events are exercises of 'natural feeling', Burke claims, 'because we are so made as to be affected at such spectacles', in which 'our passions instruct our reason' (8: 131). The metaphysics that informs Burke's political aesthetics of tragic theatre, which relies on feeling as a method of mass submission to power, is best expressed in this passage in *Reflections*:

[W]e have consecrated the state, that no man should approach to look into its defects or corruptions but with due caution; that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its subversion; that he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude. (8: 146)

This personification of the state, for one thing, symbolises a now widely

¹⁷ Reid identifies the theatrical persona of Sarah Siddons as the 'victim' of 'pathetic and domestic tragedy' on which Burke's portrayal of Marie Antoinette was modelled. See Christopher Reid, 'Edmund Burke's Tragic Muse: Sarah Siddons and the "Feminization" of the *Reflections*', in Steven Blakemore (ed.), *Burke and the French Revolution: Bicentennial Essays* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1992), 1-27.

recognised ideological strain in Burke that a particular group of persons is synecdochic to the collective. Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), written in defence of his state pension against the indictment from the Duke of Bedford, illustrates his belief in the binding between personal and national fate. Bedford shares Paine's political views and is dedicated to French Revolutionary principles. Burke believes his pension is fully justified, not least because of his service relating to Indian Colonial justice during that time, but also because of its adherence to laws and traditions of the British Nation against the Revolutionary disrespect of private property in the name of democratic universalism. He charges Bedford of the fatal confusion of private and public causes in prosecuting a poor old man (Burke) in the name of the public good. He contends that Bedford's own personal interest is provided by the British state, and, by capitulating to the French principles, Bedford decontextualises and uproots the British 'oak' (9: 171).¹⁸ In the letter, Burke plays a dejected old man under the cruel attack of a rich young magnate seduced by French principles. Since he insists his personal fate is synecdochic to that of the British Nation, an assault on him would mean surrender to the universalist doctrine of the French that would destroy all: 'We shall all of us, perish and be overwhelmed in a common ruin. If a great storm blow[s] on our coast, it will cast the whales on the strand as well as the periwinkles. [The Duke of Bedford] will not survive the poor grantee he despises, no not for a twelvemonth' (9: 173). This smooth transition from individual to collective matters leads Frans de Bruyn to conclude that the 'line

¹⁸ This metaphor of social organicity is found first in *Reflections*, 8: 136.

between public and private, which the “letter to a noble lord” so ambivalently straddles, is all but erased’.¹⁹ Insisting that his private tranquillity must be guaranteed with the pension, Burke contends effectively that it was the universalist doctrine of the Revolution that encouraged the tyranny of the public at the expense of the private. Burke’s fear of this doctrine lies in its tendency to homogenise, ironically turning concrete individuals into the faceless ‘swinish’ multitude.

Burke’s insistence on the inseparability of person and polity is in stark contrast to Paine’s conception of society as a congregation of freestanding individuals, as is demonstrated by his emphasis on the institutional nature of humanity: ‘Every sort of moral, every sort of civil, every sort of politic institution, aiding the rational and natural ties that connect the human understanding and affections to the divine, are not more than necessary, in order to build up that wonderful structure, Man’ (8: 143). Burke observes that ‘Man’ as a product of civil society needs to be understood through a structural approach. His very existence is an intricate nexus of institutions; it demands affective engagement rather than detachment because the immeasurable involvement of interpersonal interests incarnated in such an existence is difficult to dismiss as being external to the individual interest. As Burke argues, civil institutions are incarnated in the form of the government, which performs the irreplaceable task of providing human wants and curbing unrestrained individual passions (8: 110). Civil laws not only guarantee liberty and organise public life, but also define

¹⁹ De Bruyn, *Literary Genres*, 53.

individual boundaries: 'Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself' (8: 110). Burke's individual 'man' is more than individual, as it often entails a totality of social interests, which he cannot easily disengage from. Burke claims that 'We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages' (8: 138). The 'private stock of reason' can be read as a refutation of the natural right theory, which for Burke places 'man' into a self-sufficient individualism. Burke believes that the confiscation of the property of the Gallican Church by the National Assembly in late 1789 was a political crime in that it disrupted both the symbolic and substantial social ties, since the function of the Church is not only religious but also socioeconomic, as its property entitles them to perform their social duty through the provision for the multitude (8: 150-154). In place of this social tie founded on concrete landed property was the introduction of the paper circulation of *assignats* that, Burke argues, set social relation afloat in the abstract arithmetic of business relation, which can only 'cement' atomised and homogenised individuals (8: 236). In a sense, therefore, Burke's sympathy is not a Smithian act of empathy, which relies on the projection of the sentiment and interest of one's self onto others. It is because the social totality that constitutes the social being of the individual leads to an idea that one's own interest is bound up with that of others. To sympathise with others, as Burke argues, is an expression of 'natural', 'untaught' feeling, because

there is an I, or part of my interest, in others. Luke Gibbons has traced Burke's Irish cultural context and shows that Burke's idea of sympathy demands unmediated confrontation with the sufferer as an exercise of solidarity.²⁰ In this sense, pathos for Burke is an ethical imperative when engagement is needed in a time of collective crisis, and the sense of disengagement expressed in irreverent bathos is dangerous because it assumes the position of a neutral observer from the outside, which for Burke is only a denial of one's share in the social totality.

For Burke, it is also the case that individuals may not develop such consciousness as they are engrossed in private engagements. As Burke defends the religious establishment as 'the consecration of the state', it is necessary to 'operate with an wholesome awe upon free citizens'. It is 'even more necessary than in such societies, where the people by the terms of their subjection are confined to private sentiments, and the management of their own family concerns' (8: 143).²¹ Burke's recourse in *Reflections* to religious symbolism

²⁰ Reading Burke's discourse on sympathy from *Sublime and Beautiful* onward, Luke Gibbons argues convincingly that 'sympathy' in Burke has its origin in the witness of pain and suffering that induces terror as a trigger of a sublime process: a process that demands the mental labour of sympathetic fellow-feeling and a social commitment to relieving the plight of the sufferer to produce sublime 'delight'. Thus the socially cohesive, 'beautiful' category of feeling already partakes of a sublime character. Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 2 and 3.

²¹ The last sentence is to some extent reminiscent of a moribund civic humanist theory by the end of the century, which holds that the knowledge of public interest is unlikely to be available to the common people since they are engaged in private concerns, rather than privileged by a high social position to a more panoramic view of society and its collective interest. See again John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting*, esp. ch. 1. These arguments implicitly recall Burke's political theory of natural law in custom and tradition that constitutes the social being of the individual.

exemplifies his attempt to cohere a nation by redirecting the ‘private sentiments’ with ‘an wholesome awe’. Religious symbolism thus ties citizens together. It is therefore more accurate to say that the ‘natural feeling’ somehow has to be imposed, as the ‘decent drapery’ of civilisation is ‘superadded’, or the whole social system will crumble into ‘naked, shivering’ individual animality (8: 128).²² Yet the church may not be the most efficient in instructing this civil virtue, since ‘theatre is a better school of moral sentiments than churches’ (8: 132). Scholars have done a lot to explore the figure of theatre in Burke as a cornerstone of his allegory of political order.²³ Theatre can represent spectacles of horror that affect the audience ‘without any elaborate process of reasoning’ (ibid), and Burke is effectively recommending tragic theatre as the byway of reason in the time of communal crisis.

Tragic feeling for Burke serves to curb individualism and to raise social ties to a symbolic and affective consciousness. Scholars have frequently commented on the relationship between theatre and reality in Burke, but these comments

²² As critics recognise, ‘natural’ feeling in Burke is also already acquired through civil process, as Burke’s idea of ‘second nature’ shows. See James Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 69-74. Claude Rawson suggests that the phrase ‘inbred sentiments’, while denoting natural and innate, carries overtones of ‘bred into’, which suggests the sentiments are ‘absorbed by a deep process of breeding’ and ‘can partly be described as one of acquiring *habits*’. Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment, 1660-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 176.

²³ See, among others, Peter Melvin, ‘Burke on Theatricality and Revolution’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975), 447-68; Paul Hindson and Tim Gray, *Burke's Dramatic Theory of Politics*; Geraldine Friedman, ‘History in the Background of Wordsworth’s “Blind Beggar”’, *ELH* 56 (1989), 131-34; Christopher Reid, ‘Edmund Burke’s Tragic Muse’; Julie Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10-11, 136-43; Frans de Bruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke*, ch. 4.

combine an unresolved tension. Some point out that, for Burke, theatre is inseparable from real life, yet this judgment is not easy to square with another popular issue that Burke opposes, namely the over-theatricalisation of social life, and his concomitant desire to shore up the boundary for theatre.²⁴ Burke's principle for the relationship between theatre and reality, I argue, hinges, again, on his social metaphysics concerning the personal's inevitable involvement in the interpersonal. In the famous reflection on the 'effect of tragedy' in Burke's *The Sublime and Beautiful*, for example, Burke imagines that the popularity of even the most intense tragic performance on stage cannot compete with the sensation caused by an actual public execution. Burke explains that it is because the enjoyment of a tragedy depends on whether an aesthetic distance can be maintained. It requires the fact that the spectator himself is removed from imminent danger. In other words, with his own interest detached from the sufferer's, it is possible for him to enjoy. His comparison in *Reflections* of the pathetic emotion towards the tragic theatre with that of real-life political turmoil should therefore be read in this light: 'Some tears might be drawn from me, if such a spectacle were exhibited on the stage. I should be truly ashamed of finding in myself that superficial, theatric sense of painted distress, whilst I could

²⁴ For the former point, see Paul Hindson and Tim Gary, *Burke's Dramatic Theory*, *passim*, and Tom Furniss, *Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, 162: 'For Burke, there is, or ought to be, no difference between our response to theatre and to reality'. For the latter point, see Geraldine Friedman, 'History in the Background of Wordsworth's "Blind Beggar"', *ELH* 56 (1989): 125-48 (131-34). Friedman puts her points in national terms: in Burke the 'English theatre', in its authentic form, is contrasted to 'French theatricality.' While the former is restricted to its proper place, the actual theatre, the latter tends to generalise and insinuate its airy concept into 'real life.' The contrast is analogous to that of the solid economy of England and abstract paper circulation of France.

exult over it in real life. With such a perverted mind, I could never venture to shew my face at a tragedy. People would think the tears that Garrick formerly, or that Siddons not long since, have extorted from me, were the tears of hypocrisy; I should know them to be the tears of folly' (8: 132). Burke therefore demands tragic feeling to be applied to real-life tragedy of revolution because it is the only way to constrain the tragedy of 'actual crime' and the inappropriate 'exultation' from the audience (ibid.) In the absence of theatrical feeling, the monstrosity of human nature will be released into real life where public interests are intricate. The terrain of public life will fall to 'insatiable appetites' of private individuals, who uses 'public benefits' as their 'pretext' (8: 133).

This metaphysics of the social totality in the intricate network of lived experience and collective interest is clearly in contrast to Paine's social vision of 'national men' who are universally connected by commercial relation alone. Their respective expression in tragedy and comedy bespeaks the centrality of pathos and bathos in advancing political belief. For Burke, tragic feeling for an individual, or an object, provides the cohesion a civil society desperately needs when the customs and institutions that constitute common life are crumbling into crowd politics. It binds the personal with the political. Figuratively speaking, he retreats from comedy as he does not believe it could be situated in the vacuum of civil life, which he finds the radicals are creating.

2.3 Popular Radical Humour and the Quixotism of Burke

Burke's impassioned castigation of the revolution and vindication of the *ancien regime* struck many of his contemporary readers as a hyperbolic overreaction, and rendered himself vulnerable to comic deflation to his dramatic pathos. As an unrepentant polemicist, Burke unsurprisingly lent himself to relentless caricatures. But there were readers, however, with a political persuasion opposite to Burke's, who felt encouraged or even congratulated by Burke's scorn of their values. John Thelwall gives Burke rather than Tom Paine the credit for motivating his radicalism: 'You see, the aristocrats themselves are compelled to furnish us with these [revolutionary] arguments. In short, if you wish to be a true democrat, read every aristocratic book that is published. Begin with *Burke's* Reflections, for I declare to you, that it was not *Tom Paine* but *Edmund Burke* that made me so zealous a reformer'.²⁵ In his *Vindiciae Gallicae*, the early James Mackintosh comments on Burke's tone: 'He affects to despise those whom he appears to dread. His anger exalts those whom his ridicule would vilify; and on those whom at one moment he derides as too contemptible for resentment, he at another confers a criminal eminence, as too audacious for contempt'.²⁶ For Mackintosh, Burke's rage serves to hide his fear, and his language is so bitter as to sacrifice some humour.

The radicals in the 1790s consult various sources of loyalist discourse against which they construct their political subjectivity. But Burke in particular offers the radicals a comic grammar to do so. His marginal status in

²⁵ John Thelwall, *The Tribune* (London, 1795-96), 3: 194-95.

²⁶ James Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, 3rd. edn (London, 1791), reprinted in Gregory Claeys (ed.) *Political Writings of the 1790s* (London: Pickering, 1995), 1: 359.

contemporary politics and his self-portrayal as a Quixote is particularly conducive to radical self-congratulation. Indeed, caricaturists who exploit Burke's self-image as Quixote are not limited to his radical opponents but include satirists with undetermined political leanings.²⁷ Burke's use of the figure of Quixote rests on this divided semantics. In *Reflections*, Burke's ridicule of the revolutionaries as 'metaphysical' dreamers whose emancipatory 'light' of reason must meet 'refraction' in 'the dense medium of common life' provides a Quixotic theme for the conservatives such as the counter-revolutionary novelists to work on, which I shall discuss in Chapter 4. On the other hand, Burke's self-representation as custodian of an endangered *ancien regime* is self-consciously Quixotic, leaving the radicals a convenient material of caricature. Scholars have done a lot to demonstrate that Burke's figurative requiem for 'the age of chivalry' is a coded defence of the virtues, manners, and religion necessary for modern commercial society to maintain itself. Quixotism is therefore not anachronistic, but a forgotten communal ethos that has to be reinvented in the present to reform a society of business relations dominated by 'sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators' of the Revolutionary republicanism.²⁸

In this sense, Burke's use of the Quixote leans towards the tradition of

²⁷ See, for example, Fredrick George Byron's graphic satires on Burke's Quixotism, collected in Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 140-44.

²⁸ See William C. Dowling, 'Burke and the Age of Chivalry', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 12 (1982), 109-24; Frans de Bruyn, 'Edmund Burke and the Political Quixote, Romance, Chivalry, and the Political Imagination', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 16 (2004), 695-734; F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2: 300-302.

moral allegory rather than that of what Ronald Paulson calls the aesthetics of comedy.²⁹ Burke depicts a system of common life in turmoil, and chooses his own Quixotic image to dwell on the tragic side of the struggle with the ways things are (or are going to be). The comic side of Quixotism becomes open to the radicals in their attack on Burke to advance a different social vision to the conservative system of common life. Since Burke's rendition of the Quixote renounces its comicality, this most popular comic character in the eighteenth century undergoes a change in semantic association. If a popular idea of Quixote regards this character as a deluded persona at odds with 'common life', Burke's reinterpretation effectively reestablishes Quixote as its moral custodian. Quixote becomes the endangered *norm*, while the rising order adumbrated in the Revolutionary events signals the degeneration of 'common life'. Burke's reading of Quixotism is a far cry from the eighteenth-century comedy of character as he resituates the Quixotic character in common life's ruin. Therefore, a critical strain of Quixotism I account for in the previous chapter in eighteenth-century comic critical paradigm, particularly in Corbyn Morris's pleasurable company at one's dinner table, is absent in this political context.³⁰

If the Quixote symbolises a powerless individual unable to change the state of things, then this is the exact pitch of Burke's self-portrayal. In her elegy on the death of Burke in 1797, Jane West represents Burke as an otherworldly sage, his death being a timely flight from the fallen world whose wrongful direction he

²⁹ See Chapter 1.

³⁰ See Chapter 1.

could not influence. West asks Burke to ‘Go — join the Host of Britain’s mighty dead.’ She imagines him finding a balmy repose with heroes from a glorious past, away from the vicious present, about which he could do nothing.³¹ Perhaps exaggerating Burke’s impotence, West nonetheless points out his internal self-exile from British politics in the 1790s. *Reflections* itself concludes with Burke’s lamentation of his old age and a sense of his inability to influence the course of the things he witnessed (8: 291-93). Burke’s impassioned polemics invite radical readings of them as a sign of desperation, which offers the radicals a reason for glee. In *Rights of Man*, Paine refuses to sympathise with Burke’s enthusiastic histrionics. He presents Burke as a self-isolated, aged man, seized by irrational deliriums, as if he posed no threat: a comic-bathetic counterpart to Burke’s self-confessed dejection in old age. Therefore, Burke’s self-portrayal as Quixote strikes the plain-minded Paine as nothing other than an unequivocal dream vision of the relics of the past that affords amusement without moral or political significance: ‘In the rhapsody of his imagination, he has discovered a world of wind-mills, and his sorrows are, that there are no Quixotes to attack them. But if the age of aristocracy, like that of chivalry, should fall, and they had originally some connection, Mr. Burke, the trumpeter of the order, may continue his parody to the end, and finish with exclaiming, “*Othello's occupation's gone!*”’ (1: 259). Paine’s treatment of Burke’s personality implies that Burke is obsessed with his publicly irrelevant hobbyhorse, as Paine reiterates his intention to leave Burke alone with ‘what he pleases’: ‘Here then lies the monster; and Mr. Burke,

³¹ Jane West, *An Elegy on the Death of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London, 1797), 3.

if he pleases, may write its epitaph' (1: 288).³² Paine asserts that 'Ignorance is of a very peculiar nature; once dispelled, it is impossible to re-establish it' (1: 320). The issue of Paine's intellectual accuracy and sophistication aside, the significance lies in the political use of this rhetorical pattern as a shared method of radicalism in the 1790s for galvanising radical energy.

The political significance of radical use of the Quixote in response to Burke is, so to speak, a renewal of the 'superiority' paradigm. The comic Quixote in the eighteenth century is a source of pleasure whose political conflict with 'common life' is neutralised through aestheticisation. In other words, the Quixote, or more broadly the 'humourist', is an indispensable aesthetic object to be *preserved* for amusement. Radical humour, however, while retaining this comic grammar, combines with the political commitment to triumph over and *oust* that object. The radical mockery of Burke's Quixotism marks a symbolic fulfilment of its political orthodoxy, or a symbolic empowerment. Daniel Isaac Eaton's popular radical periodicals *Politics for the People* features a song titled 'The Triumph of Reason', over, predictably, the political Quixote such as Burke:

Like Quixote, that renowned Knight, so fam'd in Spanish tales,
And full as mad, stepp'd Edmund [Burke] forth, equipt in *courtly mail*,
He from the Treasury took a spear, 'twas tipt with gold, and pointed,
And on his arm he bore a shield, giv'n by the Lord's anointed,
Thus arm'd with power *he thought divine*, he rush'd into the battle,
And on the staymaker, most furiously did rattle,

³² See also 1: 272, 414.

He threw his darts sublime about, and rav'd of *plots* and *treason*,

But Freedom's champion stood unhurt, for his was clad in reason.³³

The significations are straightforward and conventional in popular radicalism. 'Freedom's champion', like Quixote's windmill, 'stood unhurt' and renders Burke's 'sublime' crusade quixotically comic. Such a correspondence of Burke and radicalism to, respectively, Quixotism and realism, seems to position 'reason' and 'freedom' as something of an unshakable *status quo* by way of its analogy to the Quixotic windmill. Through this triumphant tonality, the radical struggle for political power turns into an assertion, as if radicals were already in power.

Given that Burke's 'common life' is of settlement and stability, the employment of such figure of a picaresque rover as the Quixote in his political rhetoric is ironic, as if he himself is disconnected from 'common life'. For all its variations, the Quixotic theme in the eighteenth century always preserves the denotation of a deluded narcissist or an anachronistic crusader. As Burke's expression of dejection manoeuvred him into the position of the anachronistic, his implicit concession from the orthodoxy of political and moral values supplies a ready vacancy for the radicals to fill in. Burke's interpretation of Quixotism suggests one way to understand the radical acceptance and appropriation of Burke's 'swinish multitude' as an ironic badge of honour. The interesting paradox of this phrase lies therefore in its transformation from the reiteration of the multitude's political disenfranchisement to a symbolic empowerment. In a

³³ *Politics for the People; or, a Salmagundy for Swine*. (London: D. I. Eaton, 1794-95), vol. 1, part 2, p. 4.

parody on reactionaries, Eaton evokes Quixotism as shorthand for the futile reactionary nostalgia. He parodies the loyalist laments for the ‘Golden age’ of the ‘feudal system’, controlled by strict social stratification: ‘the different orders of society were kept in perfectly distinct and separate — there were kings, barons, priests, yeomanry, villains and slaves; and they were, I believe, with regard to rank and power, in the order in which I have named them’.³⁴ The comic rendition of Burke’s moral crusade resembles the Bergsonian comedy that represents its object of laughter as an isolated character, who is unable to fit in their social surroundings. As Paine writes of Burke’s sentimental ‘rhapsody’, ‘[Burke] mounted in the air like a balloon, to draw the eyes of the multitude from the ground they stand upon’ (1: 282). Paine’s accusation of Burke’s airiness (perhaps a retaliation to what Burke did to the radical ‘metaphysicians’ in *Reflections*) effectively contends that it is Burke who is unable to descend to the mundane.

This section does not intend to overstate Burke’s centrality in radical humour, but it does want to stress that Burke’s peculiar rendition of the Quixotic trope contributes to clear a space for the popular radical wits to reconstruct the aesthetics of comedy from a ideological foundation different from that of the established civil framework. It helps the restoration of laughter of superiority, which combines with the aesthetics of popular conviviality, as I will discuss below.

³⁴ D. I. Eaton, *The Pernicious Effects of the Art of Printing upon Society, Exposed: A Short Essay Addressed to the Friends of Social Order* (London: D. I. Eaton, 1793), 6.

2.4 Common Sense and the 'Open Theatre of the World'

Paine's response to Burke in *Rights of Man* ideologically underpins popular radical humour in a number of ways. His relentless and willfully populist caricature of monarchy and the existing system of government (the British 'mixed' government) in *Rights of Man* encouraged and provided some ideological basis for a tradition of popular radical humour. This tradition of radical humour, which was continued in the early nineteenth century in, *inter alia*, William Hone and the *Black Dwarf*, has received attention from cultural historians, who read it as popular rhetoric of subversion, and as a rhetorical feature of an ideological alternative to the cultural hegemony of the ruling class.³⁵

Although *Reflections* results from a historically specific event, its polemic touches on broader and trans-historical controversies, such as the viability of popular politics, and the use and distribution of power. 'Swinish multitude', which describes the unrestrained activity of the revolutionary crowd, signifies Burke's belief, among others, of the need to restore meritocracy. One way to achieve this end is through tragic theatre, which, according to Burke, has become

³⁵ See Joseph M. Butwin, 'Seditious Laughter'; Richard Hendrix, 'Popular Humor and "The Black Dwarf"', *Journal of British Studies*, 16.1 (1976), 108-28. Also, Marcus Wood's *Radical Satire and Popular Culture, 1790-1822*, in echo to Iain McCalman's celebrated methodology of rediscovery of radical underground culture that resists the cultural hegemony of 'respectability', concentrates on the innovative forms of publication and unorthodox modes of expression to subvert received political consensus.

a better candidate than the pulpit as the medium of moral education and social control. The revolutionary crisis of royalty is described figuratively as the Fall of the Great in tragic theatre, best illustrated in a hyperbolic scenario in ‘which the kings are hurl’d from their throne’, serving to inspire fear and sympathy and thereby consolidate loyalist sentiments: ‘We are alarmed into reflexion; our minds (as it has long been observed) are purified by terror and pity; our weak unthinking pride is humbled, under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom’ (8: 131-32). Just as his tragic theatre invites Paine’s comic caricature, Burke’s literary performance offers what I have emphasised as being the ideological horizon — humour as a complement to reason — upon which polemical positions can be articulated.

Pamphlet rejoinders to Burke’s *Reflections*, including those by Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Mackintosh, oppose Burke’s reliance on sentimental language to their own rationalist approaches. But, with the exception of Paine, the language of bathos has rarely been combined with rationalist argument to counteract Burke’s powerful aesthetic of pathos. In Paine’s *Rights of Man*, reason is partly constituted by a bathetic counterblast to the mystical obscurantism of statecraft. Its political metaphor is ‘the open theatre of the world’:

. . . what is called Monarchy always appears to me a silly contemptible thing. I compare it to something kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity; but when, by an accident, the curtain happens to be opened,

and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter.

In the representative system of Government, nothing of this can happen.

Like the nation itself, it possesses a perpetual stamina, as well of body as of mind, and presents itself on the open theater [*sic*] of the world in a fair and manly manner. Whatever its excellencies or defects, they are visible to all. It exists not by fraud or mystery; it deals not in cant or sophistry; but inspire a language that, passing from heart to heart, is felt and understood.³⁶

This section explains the relation between Paine's ethics of laughter and the radical political theory in the first paragraph and the next section explains the other. Paine's metaphoric in the first paragraph is read as a specific response to Burke's theatrical metaphor of the necessity of cultural and political imposition on the pre-civil being of humanity, and its crisis in the popular attempt at its subversion: 'All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion' (8: 128). As I will unfold in the next section, although Paine's 'open theatre' can be seen as a pointed inversion of Burke's counter-revolutionary imagery of this passage, its political implications are more than this gesture of subversion. As may be readily

³⁶ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 1: 373. Unless otherwise specified, all citations of Paine are from this edition, given hereafter in volume and page number in the main text.

observed, the passage on the ‘open theatre’ in Paine figures theatrical laughter as a feature in the Enlightenment doctrine of transparency. This epistemological function by no means exhausts its significance, which, as Gillian Russell argues, involves a political transformation in which popular theatrical activities pose an alternative to the institutionalised theatre: for Burke, theatre as an institution is an indispensable political apparatus for the moral education and social control of the civil subjects, insofar as its actors maintain its affective grip on their spectators. Paine’s ‘open theatre’, on the other hand, confers the agency of critical observation upon the viewing crowd, and thereby grants it a political subjectivity.³⁷ As Jon Mee observes, the contrast can be understood as that between Aristotelian tragedy and Brechtian theatre.³⁸ However, it is important that such judgment does not lapse into a dichotomous formulation of the contrast between Burke and Paine as Tragedy versus Comedy, which, though useful for grasping the general political implication, obscures some subtlety in both pamphleteers. I have argued that Burke had a comic theory. As for Paine, the last sentence in which Paine calls for the inspiration of ‘a language that, passing from heart to heart, is felt and understood’, is often passed by in critical discussion. I want therefore to draw attention to its affective dimension, its dimension of the radical imagination of social organisation. Such imagination informs a different level of radical politics, which combines feeling and humour.

Related to the theatrical figuration of politics is the ‘literary’ aspect that lies

³⁷ Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society, 1793-1815* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 24.

³⁸ Jon Mee, ‘The Political Showman at Home’, 43.

at the heart of the ideological content of the Burke-Paine dispute. It is customarily understood that Paine insists on the transparency of language and rejects the rhetorical, symbolic, and affective cloaking that get in the way of argumentative clarity. This received wisdom concerning Paine clearly derives from the structural position that critics customarily assign to Paine, who is posed as the both the ideological and the stylistic opposite of Burke. Regarding this contrast, David Duff concludes that 'Paine "rough-mixes" genres, juxtaposing rather than synthesizing them, and refusing the impression of organic unity for which Burke strives. The reader of *Rights of Man* is induced into an analytic, anti-organic, sceptical frame of mind, as Paine lays bare his sources, breaks up his text and buttresses his argument with facts and figures in documentary or tabular form.'³⁹ Such a contrast does indeed grasp a good deal of the facts of the general antagonism of the Revolution controversy represented by Burke and Paine. But to read Paine's style as a reflection of an 'analytic, anti-organic, sceptical frame of mind' may obscure the affirmative confidence of his language. A number of critics point out that Paine's 'plain' style does not make it rhetoric-free,⁴⁰ with some regarding his seemingly facile use of 'rational'

³⁹ David Duff, 'Burke And Paine: Contrasts', in Pamela Clemit (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 68-69.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Brain Woodcock, 'Writing the Revolution: Aspects of Thomas Paine's Prose', *Prose Studies*, 15.2 (1992), 171-186; Tom Furniss, 'Rhetoric in Revolution: The Role of Language in Paine's critique of Burke', in *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, ed. by Keith Hanley and Raman Selden (London: Harvester, 1990), 23-48; John Turner, 'Burke, Paine, and the Nature of Language.' *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 19 (1989): 50; and

language as little better than demagoguery, while others suggest that he manipulates language to misread and slander Burke for political ends.⁴¹ One critic goes so far as to read this gap as his practical betrayal of his theory: Paine is as rhetorical as Burke, relying heavily on similes and metaphors to convey his ideas; while Burke's figurative speech is flamboyant and dramatic, Paine's is equally figurative, only relying more on formulaic and conventional metaphors.⁴² For all its analytical accuracy, however, this observation obscures the pragmatic dimension of rhetoric. Although it does distinguish the different rhetorical strategies in Paine with regard to different subject matters, its analysis remains largely confined to language as a representation of reality, and downplays the equally important question of identity politics, in which the confrontational nature of Paine's language is registered. Olivia Smith's notion of the 'intellectual vernacular', although formed largely from an uncritical reading of Paine's

Edward Larkin, *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴¹ For Paine as a demagogue, see Evelyn J. Hinz, 'The "Reasonable" Style of Tom Paine,' *Queen's Quarterly*, 79 (1972), 231-41. For Paine as a political opportunist, see Steven Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic Event* (Hanover, N. H.; London: Brown UP, 1988). Blakemore observes that Burke understood the power of language to influence social reality, and analyses how Burke charged the radicals of perverting the proper relation of language and natural and social reality. But his own poststructural approach to language perhaps too neatly coheres with Burke's and, as Tom Furniss remarks, Blakemore 'is too much of a Burkean himself'. Furness, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 278. For an even more tendentious charge against Paine's integrity, see Blakemore, *Intertextual War: Edmund Burke and the French Revolution in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), chap. 4-6.

⁴² Jane Hudson, 'What is this metaphor called a Crown?', in *Language and Politics in Burke, Wollstonecraft, Paine and Godwin* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), esp. 137-42.

‘plainness’, remains indispensable regarding the historical, political, and, in particular, confrontational aspects.⁴³ This aspect of Paine’s rhetoric is demonstrated in the unabashed market populism of the preface to Part II of *Rights of Man*: ‘If Mr. Burke, or any person on his side [of] the question, will produce an answer to the *Rights of Man* that shall extend to a half, or even to a fourth part of the number of copies to which the *Rights of Man* extended, I will reply to his work. But until this be done, I shall so far take the sense of the public for my guide (and the world knows I am not a flatterer) that what they do not think worthwhile to read, is not worth mine to answer’ (1: 350). By expressing confidence in the political understanding of his mass readership, Paine is able to excite a collective sentiment against a common enemy. Paine’s usage of simile and metaphor, for instance, is usually pointedly bathetic and aims for a specific target. Most of the similes and metaphors are used to represent Burke’s language and the authority and establishment he defends, *in order* to deflate their sublime appearances and derisively reveal the realities under the veil. The famous ‘plumage and dying bird’ metaphor, for instance, represents Burke as a quixotic aesthete without regard for social reality. These figurative expressions are aimed derisively at the political realities he despises or disapproves of, by deeming them ludicrous and insignificant.⁴⁴ Paine’s bathetic language serves as a contrast

⁴³ See Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), ch. 2. Paine’s ‘intellectual vernacular’, according to Smith, is a language confident in commonsense expression of intellectual ideas and the popularisation of the otherwise elitist concepts among common readers.

⁴⁴ To name only a handful of examples: ‘War is the Faro table of Governments, and nations the dupes of the games’ (1: 362); ‘A vast mass of mankind are degradedly thrown into . . . the

to Burkean pathos. When it comes to explaining his own ideology and proposals for social reform, he often becomes more factual, assertive, compositional, argumentative, and ‘vulgar.’⁴⁵

Remarking on the difference between a modern republican and an ancient courtier with respect to monarchy, Paine writes that the one affirms its value by belief, while the other ‘laughs at it, knowing it to be nothing’ (1: 296-297). This sentence not only suggests that laughter and knowledge go spontaneously hand in hand, but also highlights the combination of the performance of feeling and rational understanding. We may therefore reconsider James Epstein’s judgment that ‘Paine has a puritan contempt for public show. . . . Reason is not counter-but anti-theatrical’. For Epstein, as for many of Paine’s commentators, the Enlightenment reason in Paine must do away with any mediating feature that represents the spells and phantasms of obscurantism.⁴⁶ The idea of Paine’s alleged anti-theatricality, moreover, depends perhaps on preconceptions about the Enlightenment and/or theatre: of Enlightenment as shorthand for the absolutism of reason while alternative forms of communication are illegitimate, or of the theatre conceived in terms of a cluster of generic conventions. As

puppet-show of State and Aristocracy’ (1: 259); ‘in the rhapsody of [Burke’s] imagination he has discovered a world of windmill, and his sorrows are that there are no Quixotes to attack them’ (1: 267); ‘[Burke] mounted in the air like a balloon, to draw the eyes of the multitude from the ground they stand upon’ (1: 282). Let alone his witticism in ‘no-ability’ (1: 310). Some of these witty quips will be discussed later in this chapter.

⁴⁵ James Boulton uses ‘vulgar’, an etymologically neutral word meaning ‘of the people’, to describe Paine’s style as consistent with his populism and plebeian politics. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London: Routledge, 1963), 134-50.

⁴⁶ Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 111, 112.

Gillian Russell argues, *Rights of Man* is far from anti-theatrical as commentators have asserted, but should be regarded as an alternative theatrical vision of a more mobile form of communication in contrast to Burke's reasserted theatrical orthodoxy.⁴⁷ The figure of 'open theatre' appears as a rejection of the Burkean emphasis on pathos. I will argue that Paine's allegory of the theatre of bathos as a mode of confrontation with political institution provides an alternative affective communication among the popular subjects.

So far I have presented Paine as the Enlightenment writer who laughs as he reasons. I have also stressed the ethical significance of his rhetorics of humour in highlighting the confrontational aspect of the polemics and in appealing to the wider reading public. Paine's caricature of his political opponents is a way to democratise reason and make his otherwise 'rational' polemics more accessible.⁴⁸ Yet laughter in Paine's popular radicalism involves more than rational bathos against ruling-class obscurantism. The word 'laugh' and its derivatives appear frequently in his major works from *American Crisis* to *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason*. Laughter is used predominantly in the sense of ridicule, which expresses the triumph of 'reason' and 'common sense' over certain sets of value that Paine is dedicated to eliminating: the wishful militarism of the English Tories in *American Crisis*, the apology for the *ancien regime* in *Rights of Man*, and religious obscurantism in *Age of Reason*. For Paine, laughter

⁴⁷ Gillian Russell, 'Revolutionary Drama', in Pamela Clemit (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 175-89.

⁴⁸ For explorations of Paine's literary style dedicated to popularising reason, see Olivia Smith, *Politics of Language*, ch. 2, and Edward Larkin, *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution*.

is a language of merciless iconoclasm. It serves a negative function for reason, which is to ‘dismiss . . . with disdain’ (1: 189). Rational dismissal, however, does not exhaust Paine’s ethics of bathos, as I have also drawn attention to the constructive aspect of laughter that informs the radical social vision in which pathos is not discredited but rewritten. I will address in the next section the eighteenth-century issue of laughter to contextualise the social aesthetics of laughter in Paine and other radicals.

The difference in comic vision between Burke and Paine results from their contrary social ontologies. Among the familiar contrasts between Burke and Paine are their opposing views on the relationship between natural rights and civil rights. Burke insists that they are categorically incompatible (*Reflections*, 8: 109-10), while Paine believes that natural rights are fully convertible into civil rights (1: 275). This difference in the theory of rights can be explained by their respective views on how social life is constructed. For Burke, civil society is a dense fabric of customs, manners, laws, moralities and traditions, so any facile claim to natural rights as the inviolable rights of the individual must be inapplicable to such complex structure heavily mediated by social and material relations. Paine’s ideal society as congregation of self-sufficient individuals engaging in the co-operative forms of commerce is difficult to come to terms with the incumbent mediation of political or religious institutions. Such thinking, which can be understood as the opposition between civil society and the

government, was foreshadowed in *Common Sense*.⁴⁹ In the Paine of *Rights of Man*, this sociopolitical vision is fused with the radical ethics of laughter.

It is useful here to take a look at the ‘cement’ as a political metaphor in Burke and Paine in relation to the function of comic ridicule in political reasoning. For both Paine and Burke, this ‘cement’ symbolises an unnatural binding in society. I mentioned earlier that Burke’s ‘cement’ is a homogenising force threatening to dissolve social and cultural complexities. Burke identifies two ‘cements’ in *Reflections*, one referring to the supremacy of the city of Paris over local republics in France, and the other referring to confiscation and paper currency. Both for Burke fail to attend to the complexity of local communal affairs, acting as an abstract universal principle. The facile measures of paper circulation in particular is enforced ‘without fixed habits or local predilections’ (8:239), crudely disregarding the concrete incongruities among local interests which requires certain degree of autonomy from the tyranny of abstract universality. Pages later Burke derides *assignats* in a Bergsonian caricature in precisely this thinking. Burke’s comic ridicule of the ‘cement’ is meant to discredit a totalising measure that may obliterate the diversity of common life; in other words, to do away with the unnatural ‘cement’ is to restore concrete social relation upon which community and ‘common life’ must be built.

Paine, on the other hand, uses the ‘cement’ to reject unceremoniously the British mixed government, which was, as I note earlier, part of the ideological

⁴⁹ See a useful discussion in John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (New York: Grove Press, [2003]), 116-19., 116-19.

foundation of eighteenth-century theory of humour. Paine calls it a 'continual enigma' in the state apparatus, 'cementing and soldering the discordant parts together by corruption, to act as a whole' (1: 339). The paragraphs that follow this are exactly the lampoon of monarchy and the 'open theatre', which is meant to break the sentimental cohesion between the civilians and the state. Paine's comic ridicule identifies the incongruity in political realities and creates a bathetic distance, but in doing so he also seeks to induce superiority over its target. Laughter is a natural response to anything at odds with 'common sense'. As a method of rational dismissal, laughter seeks to smooth things out into total transparency that cleanses away all incumbent mediation of superimposed institutions. In this sense, Paine's comic language is very distant not only politically but also conceptually from the eighteenth-century comic theory in which the ludicrous incongruity is productive of pleasure and is the product of sophisticated complexity of institution. The incongruity theory, which treasures the discordant realities in social life, is in Paine's comic performance completely abandoned. This comic language of boundary-dismantling transparency also contributes to reinvent the comic aesthetic of Hutcheson's 'contagious' laughter, to which I now turn.

2.5 The 'Contagious' Laughter: A Universal Sympathy 'Passing from Heart to Heart'

A main argument of Paine's counterblast to Burke's *Reflections*, surely, is

the priority of ‘common sense’ over piety, and of reason over sentimentality. Yet some of the most piercing remarks found in *Rights of Man* are put precisely in terms of sentiment. Echoing Wollstonecraft’s early rationalist rebuke to Burke and her mockery of his ‘inbred sentiments’, Paine nonetheless registers feeling as an indispensable category of democratic politics and implicitly assumes criteria for judging feeling’s authenticity. Paine complains of Burke’s melodramatic style and compares it to La Fayette’s: ‘how ineffectual, though gay with flowers, are all his declamation and his arguments compared with [La Fayette’s] clear, concise, and soul-animating sentiments!’ The counter-revolutionary rhapsody is ‘music in the ear, and nothing in the heart’ (1: 255). One of Paine’s main claims is that he is incapable of authentic feeling, as his famous quip testifies: ‘[Burke] pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird’ (1: 260). Paine’s attack on Burke is therefore not a dismissal of sentimentality altogether, but a contention as to what legitimate feeling ought to be. This corresponds to the concerns of radical reformers in the 1790s about how to regulate feeling to bring about progressive reform or radical change. Yet ‘natural’ is also the very epithet Burke uses to congratulate his own sentiment. Loyalists respond to the radical accusation of their sentimentalism in the same vocabulary.⁵⁰ This is one of the many examples in which political disagreement was often framed, not so much in theoretical contents, as in the definition of words in the 1790s. As a result, the war of letters

⁵⁰ For example, one loyalist pamphlet in response to Paine’s *Rights of Man* hurls back the epithet ‘rhapsody’, with which Paine dismisses Burke’s polemics, to dub Paine’s own pamphlet. See *A Defence of the Constitution of England* (London, 1791), reprinted in Gregory Claeys, *Political Writings of the 1790s*, 5: 16.

between the two political persuasions often came down to teaching each other how to feel.

For Burke, authentic feeling is grounded in local social ties via relations of production or familiar connection, which he defends in *Reflections*, and not by the abstract notion of ‘universal benevolence’, which he castigates in *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791).⁵¹ What, then, is the radical idea of common feeling inspired by bathos? One aspect of Paine’s dispute with Burke concerns a rather straightforward political content. For Paine, sympathy is authentic insofar as it is directed to the right object (i.e. ‘the dying bird’). In the passage in which Paine contests Burke’s defence of social privilege, he highlights the uneven distribution of wealth. Burke believes that ‘the people of England can see without pain or grudging . . . a Bishop of Durham, or a Bishop of Winchester in possession of £10,000 a-year; and cannot see why it is in worse hands than estates to a like amount, in the hands of this earl or that squire’ (*Reflections*, 8: 154). Paine, on the contrary, does not bother to decide if the Bishops deserved their income, for this would miss the point: ‘It ought to be put between the bishop and the curate, and then it will stand thus — “The people of England can see without pain or grudging, a Bishop of Durham, or a Bishop of Winchester, in possession of ten thousand pounds a-year, and a curate on thirty or forty pounds a-year, or less”’ (1: 290). Here, Paine’s parodic reproduction of the sentence structure in Burke’s original text to create a sense of ridiculous

⁵¹ See 8: 314-15, where he regards the notion as symptom of Rousseavian ‘vanity’ and negation of ‘natural’ feeling.

incongruity is not simply to dismiss Burke's thesis in derision but to vacate the space for what Paine believes is the right object of sympathy (the curate) in order to rewrite Burke. By relocating Burke's sympathy from the elite to the lower orders, Paine re-registers sympathy in the ethics of the popular radicalism of solidarity.

Popular radical laughter contributes to a particular language of sympathetic tie. Laughter has customarily been understood as an expression of vitality. Vic Gatrell's *City of Laughter* demonstrates the diversity and chaotic frenzy in the increasingly modernised London, which provides material for comic incongruity, and argues that such comicality celebrates pure vitality without definite tendency as in, for example, Thomas Rowlandson's 'non-judgmental' caricature. Gatrell focuses on laughter as an expression of the pleasure-seeking eighteenth century, of its prevailing spirit of ribaldry and iconoclasm. Such vital and politically ambivalent culture, according to Gatrell's narrative, gradually gave way to nineteenth-century respectability and became a history that requires scholarly excavation of the kind that he undertakes in his study. The general thesis of Gatrell, that the phenomenon of laughter bespeaks the conflict between manner and hedonism, or between politeness and vulgarity, though capturing an important aspect of the ethical antagonism of the eighteenth century, seems to me to involve some intellectual limitations when he suggests that free laughter is understood as pure pleasure. When it comes to radical humour, Gatrell's general reading of laughter risks reproducing the conservative argument that radicalism is nothing more than anarchic egotism. Popular laughter is customarily conceived

as a resistance to restraint, or as an affirmation of ‘vulgar’ vitality against the stoic elitism of respectability. Gatrell’s discussion, on the whole, dwells on laughter as autotelic, non-tendentious freedom from moral and political pressure.⁵² However, does laughter entertain any *constructive* vision other than this obvious defiance of manner?

In Chapter 1, I mentioned that the ‘disinterested’, ‘depoliticised’, or ‘aesthetic’ character of the notion of humour in the eighteenth century reformulated rather than completely ruled out political conflict. I have shown that the tension between the transmissive universality and the plurality based on individual boundary resides within eighteenth-century discourse of sociability between Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. The notion of universal benevolence, central to radical ethics in the 1790s and reminiscent of Hutcheson’s invention of this notion in the early century, finds a link in this ethics of laughter.⁵³ Paine’s aesthetics of bathos in the ‘open theatre’ interestingly resembles Hutcheson’s comic vision in its rhetorical pattern. Laughter for both does not stop at the derision of the ridiculous but inspires a particular ‘language’ as Paine claims, which can be illustrated in Hutcheson’s description of laughter as a

⁵² Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter*; for Rowlandson, see esp. his ch. 1.

⁵³ For an account of the controversy over universal benevolence, see Evan Radcliffe, ‘Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy, and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54 (1993), 221-240. Whereas, in Corbyn Morris’s reflection on humour, ‘universal benevolence’ is the virtue that adds amiability to a comic character: ‘Humour is the most exquisite and delightful, when the Oddities and Foibles introduc’d are not mischievous or sneaking, but free, jocund, and liberal; and such as result from a generous Flow of Spirits, and a warm universal Benevolence’. Sir Roger de Coverley is the representative example for Morris. See Morris, *True Standards*, 39, 40.

communicative energy that diffuses common sentiments. In Paine's passage, it kindles transmissive democratic energies that 'pass from heart to heart'.

Lord Chesterfield in 1775 formulates the distinction between politeness and vulgarity as that between smile and laughter. The mirth of the ill-bred is 'a kind of storm', characterised by 'noisy mirth and loud peals of laughter. . . . A witty thing never excited laughter; it pleases only the mind, and never distorts the countenance: a glaring absurdity, a blunder, a silly accident, and those things that are generally called comical, may excite a laugh, though never a loud and a long one, among well-bred people.' Chesterfield's stoicism is based on the view of the laughter as a physical or material surplus hardly subsumable to the social organicism facilitated by cultivated 'wit' and 'humour'. 'True wit, or sense, never yet made any body laugh', Chesterfield writes, 'they are above it; they please the mind, and give chearfulness to countenance'.⁵⁴ Indeed, laughter is a material sign in social intercourse that can fail to correspond to its meaning — 'chearfulness', as Chesterfield puts it — and turns into a disturbing excess. In this sense, it can be a quantitative question, a matter of degree. In 1797, a jest-book still propagated the 'Laws of Laughing': 'When a merry story is ended, you may be allowed to make a little noise in laughing, as it shows your approbation of what was meant for your entertainment; but never break into the middle of a story by loud laughter, such interruption being very disagreeable to the company, as well as to the speaker; and all the merry ammunition should be

⁵⁴ Chesterfield, *Lord Chesterfield's Advice to His Son, on Men and Manners: or, a New System of Education*, 2nd edn (London, 1775), 46-47.

preserved for the conclusion'.⁵⁵ As audial medium to spread merriment, laughter can ironically turn into 'disagreeable' disruption of shared mirth when it becomes disproportionate to the actual amusement of the company. According to this view, laughter becomes excessive because, contrary to the belief in its contagiousness, its merry energy is unable to be passed on to others, but instead turns out to disturb the well-being of the company as a whole, which relies on individual boundaries maintained by self-regulation. I have accounted for the polite discourse of eighteenth-century humour that emphasises the cultivation of comic sensibility that can grasp the diversity of human experience and transform social and political contradictions into an aesthetic understanding of 'incongruity'. It means that the ludicrous in social realities is sublimated into disinterested knowledge and internalised as an acquired 'taste' or sensibility, rather than released into the raw energy of unregulated mirth that borders on social anarchy.⁵⁶

Popular radical laughter disregards this function of humour as social regulation, and resuscitates the Hutcheson's aesthetic of contagion to construct a popular sympathetic continuum. The image of laughter as contagious, or diffusively symphonic, is a vital element in many radical literary imaginations, by radical authors as diverse as Paine, John Thelwall, and William Blake. They develop their social vision of laughter against the limitation of polite sociability. Blake, for example, unabashedly defended unconstrained laughter against

⁵⁵ *Comick Magazine; Or, Compleat Library of Mirth, Humour, Wit, Gaiety, and Entertainment* (London, 1797), 6.

⁵⁶ See also Chapter 1, Sec. 3.

cultural refinement and moderation under the principle of politeness, in his annotation to Reverend Johann Caspar Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*. Lavater writes: 'Frequent laughing has been long called a sign of a little mind — whilst the scarcer smile of harmless quiet has been complimented as the mark of a noble heart — But to abstain from laughing, and exciting laughter, merely not to offend, or to risk giving offence, or not to debase the inward dignity of character — is a power unknown to many a vigorous mind.'⁵⁷ Blake responds with his characteristically blunt defiance: 'I hate scarce smiles I love laughing'.⁵⁸ Blake's defiance is far from a passive resistance, if we consider a social vision of universal simplicity laid out in his 'Laughing Song' from *Songs of Innocence* (1788):

When the green woods laugh, with the voice of joy
And the dimpling stream runs laughing by,
When the air does laugh with our merry wit,
And the green hill laughs with the noise of it.
When the meadows laugh with lively green
And the grasshopper laughs in the merry scene,
When Mary and Susan and Emily,
With their sweet round mouths sing Ha, Ha, He.
When the painted birds laugh in the shade
Where our table with cherries and nuts is spread

⁵⁷ Lavater, *Aphorisms on Man* (London: J. Johnson, 1788), 23.

⁵⁸ William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 585.

Come live & be merry and join with me,

To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He.⁵⁹

Blake imagines the scene of innocence: ubiquitous resonance of laughter of natural objects and human beings in universal symphony ('chorus') that approximates a borderless communality.⁶⁰ John Thelwall writes a similar envisagement in celebration of 'The Genius of France' in *The Peripatetic*, in which the persona of France embodies the unfettered freedom from tyranny that gestures towards universal utopia:

See Her swains render'd happy — her cities all shine,

Her hills "laugh and sing" with the gen'rous vine;

Fit emblem of ev'ry true patriot that lives,

He draws his support, from the embrace that he gives.

Then hail th'occasion, and boldly advance,

The glass and the song, to the Genius of France. . . .⁶¹

With implicit biblical allusions, Blake's and Thelwall's metaphors present symphonic mirth, rather than bathetic disdain, as the defining mood of laughter,

⁵⁹ Ibid, 11.

⁶⁰ As Heather Glen writes of *Songs of Innocence* in general: 'In *Songs of Innocence* there is no isolated individual: no individual exists except in relationship.' Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 137.

⁶¹ John Thelwall, 'The Genius of France', *Morning Chronicle* (30 Nov. 1792), quoted in Michael Scrivener (ed.), *Poetry and Reform: Periodical Verse from the English Democratic Press, 1792-1824* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 43-44.

upon which a new radical rhetoric of emancipation is constructed.⁶² Thelwall also writes in *The Peripatetic* of ‘laughter loud, and thoughtless joy’ as a language of solidarity with the poor, ‘the base-born crowd’, ‘the peasant’s low abode’, and the ‘widows, orphans, houseless rove’.⁶³ Thelwall’s list of the mobile, solitary social subjects represents a ruin of the ‘common life’ of settlement and communal tie. The ‘loud, thoughtless’ laughter, the very kind of laughter that would scandalise Beattie and Burke, functions as a cohesion of outcasts in a fractured society rather than a secondary response stimulated by the perception of incongruity in a sophisticated civil system.

This language of universal diffusion enables us to read some crucial social and political thoughts of Paine elaborated in the second part of *Rights of Man* as a comic imagination. In *Rights of Man*, we find a similar expression of this pastoral allegory when Paine describes the abolition of the aristocratic oligarchy of landed interest defended by Burke (1: 410-42). Paine rejects Burke’s defence of the House of Peers as pillars of society, and argues that the private interests of the oligarch do not represent collective ones. Paine envisages a community based on an equal share of the means of production by independent farmers as something of a universal communion between all men and nature: ‘When the valley laughs and sing it is not the farmer only but all the creation that rejoices’

⁶² Michael Scrivener identifies Psalm 126 as Thelwall’s allusion. See Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories*, 99. See also Mark Philp, ‘Explanatory Notes’, in Philp (ed.), *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 478.

⁶³ See Thelwall, ‘Philautiaccha; or the Voluptuary: A Rhapsody’, in *The Peripatetic; or, Sketches of the Heart, of Nature and Society* (London, 1793), 2: 58-59.

(1: 412).⁶⁴ Paine presents laughter as expression of vitality of the primitive or pre-civil, but laughter is also employed to define social relation as egalitarian and co-operative form, which Paine seems to take for self-sufficient human institution.

In these radical allegories of laughter, its cognitive dimension (e.g. ‘incongruity’) is temporarily bracketed. The laughter does not result from a perception of a ludicrous incongruity, but is a voluntary expression of mirth. Hutcheson’s mode of laughter finds a reinvented expression in these pastoral imageries. There are no targets and no identified objects in the act of laughter. In this grammar of the intransigent popular laughter, the stimuli are also absent. It also appears that this laughter for its own sake, valued in the eighteenth-century polite discourse, is appropriated in the demotic and collective language. In the absence of immediate political semantics, however, a different level of political significance is thereby registered. In contrast to the cultivation of the ‘taste’ for wit and humour that must be carried out in highly civilised conversation, these rhapsodies preserve and reinvent through the democratic vocabulary a more primitive vision of laughter as pure expression of innocence. If, so to speak, the anxiety about vulgarity often drives a polite cultural elite towards the aesthetics of comedy without laughter, the passages I discussed above show radicals boldly imagining an affective tie in laughter without comedy.

The popular radical imagination of what in Hutcheson’s terms is called

⁶⁴ Mark Philp locates Paine’s biblical allusion in Isaiah 44:23 and 49: 13. Philp, ‘Explanatory Notes’, in Philp (ed.), *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 478.

‘contagious’ laughter provides another mode of expression of what Mary Fairclough demonstrates as the aesthetics of the ‘contagion’ of the crowd through sympathy.⁶⁵ Radical humour imagines a ‘contagion’ conducted not by only ‘sympathy’, but by pathos mediated by the language of bathos. As the polite discourse of humour defines laughter as noise in comic conversation, it would at the same time bestow its enemy (the ‘vulgar’ multitude) an opportunity to construct their political subjectivity by transforming laughter from noise to voice.⁶⁶ On the other hand, if humour is to be confined in polite sociability it is because, in accordance with the theory emphasised throughout this thesis, comedy must be embedded in common life where sociability is practiced. A vision of expansive contagion will be beyond the ambit of ‘common life’ as it was currently structured in the 1790s.

The tension between comic paradigms implied in Burke is allegedly due to his perception of the precarious situation of the category of common life. For

⁶⁵ Mary Fairclough, *The Romantic Crowd: Sympathy, Controversy and Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶⁶ For Saree Makdisi, Blake’s aesthetic laughter exemplifies his life ethics expressed through the aesthetic of noise in his poetry: ‘The noise level in Blake is something like an index, a barometer — perhaps a speedometer — of making, and especially of the making of life. . . . For the question that Blake pushes us to ask is not whether life is made, but how, and under what circumstances; whether that making, and life itself, are to be sorrowful — a matter of lamenting, shrieking, howling, gnashing — or rather a matter of joy, celebration, piping, and singing; whether life is to be dominated by “happy cheer” which we “weep with joy to hear,” as in the introduction of *Songs of Innocence*, by the “bells cheerful sound” of *The Ecchoing Green*, by the “tender voice” of the lamb, by *The Laughing Song’s* “sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He,” or instead by the howlings and shriekings of life perverted, abstracted, and stolen: the harlot’s curse, the soldier’s sigh, the chimney sweeper’s “weep, weep, in notes of woe!”’ Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 265.

Paine, on the other hand, comedy (or rather, laughter) as an expression of ‘common sense’ can serve to clear away the corrupt fabric of common life and rebuild it on an alternative foundation. Burke’s understanding of human constitution is in stark contrast to Paine’s belief in the first part of *Rights of Man* in the existence of natural ‘Man’ as the builder rather than the beneficiaries of civil institutions. In the second part, Paine goes on to elaborate on his social programs that are based on this human metaphysics and the alternative civil society, although his proposal for government welfare programs may potentially contradict the principle of self-government of free individuals.⁶⁷ It is in this part he proposes ‘open theatre’ of contagious laughter, and, pages later, the vision of individuals freely joining hands in laughing mirth. He then moves on from the abstract metaphysics to the elaborate and concrete proposals of social reform that, he believes, can radically rebuild society and government: progressive taxation, old-age pension, and so on, and concludes with an universal utopia based on the structure of commerce. In such progression of argument, Paine’s comedy serves as a foundation that *creates* the fabric of common life. This reasoning, understandably, is outrageously counter-productive for Burke.

2.6 The Contagion of Laughter in Print

I have accounted for another strain in the comic theory that implies a more

⁶⁷ As John Keane points out, ‘Paine failed to consider whether a transnational welfare state would in practice contradict the ultimate aim of limiting the power of government in favor of a self-governing civil society.’ John Keane, *Tom Paine*, 303.

protean, transmissive and ‘contagious’ aesthetics. If Burke’s tragic theatre concentrates feeling on an individual as a synecdoche of the collective, Paine’s ‘open theatre’ creates transmissive feeling, paradoxically delivered by bathos against that individual. Therefore, Paine displays apathy towards Burke’s subject who, Paine believes, is no true victim of political injustice: ‘[Burke’s] hero or his heroine’, Paine remarks, ‘must be a tragic-victim expiring in show, and not the real prisoner of misery, sliding into death in the silence of dungeon’ (1: 260).⁶⁸ Paine’s remark is an illustrative counterexample to the argument that Burke insists on restriction of theatrical space against the radical confusion of theatre and real life: here it is Paine who wants to return Burke’s theatrical performance back to where it belongs. For Paine, the bathos that turns a tragic subject into a comic one and dissevers the tie between the private individual and the crowd is the first step toward the universal social vision based on the contagion of laughter. As Paine criticises Burke’s tragic theatre that teaches submission of the multitude: ‘A vast mass of mankind are degradedly thrown into the background of the human picture, to bring forward, with greater glare the puppet-show of State and Aristocracy’ (1: 267). This rhetorical device of ‘open theatre’ transforms Burke’s silent audience into laughing political subject.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ See also Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 162.

⁶⁹ Daniel Eaton’s *Politics for the People* records a letter from Edinburgh (March 1794) which depicts a struggle between loyalists and Jacobins at the theatre, which can be characterised as the struggle between Burkean pathos and Paineite bathos: ‘The Democratic parts of Cromwell’s speeches were received by thundering plaudits, while the pathetic and dignified speeches of

Burke's primary target in *Reflections* may not have been the 'swinish multitude' itself, but its mobilisers. His histrionic of the violence of the Parisian mob in *Reflections* is largely a fiction, deriving from his memory of the Gordon riot. England's popular radical movement had yet to develop by the time of the publication of *Reflections*. In comparison with his passing remark on the mob violence, Burke castigates more elaborately the 'political men of letters' such as Richard Price, whose pro-Revolution sermon for Burke could incense subversive sentiment and was the exact occasion of Burke's furious rejoinder. Burke's main fear was the spread of revolutionary ideas to England. Indeed, the anathema in Burke's *Reflections* are more likely to be the 'political men of letters' who disseminate the 'plague' of radicalism through the medium of print to the popular readership. Burke turns to tragedy in 1790 when 'common life' in his judgment has become too alarmingly unstable for comedy to develop its humour and character sedately. In endeavouring to control the very source of disorder, Burke uses tragedy to rebuild a social consensus upon which alone 'common life' can be rescued. Although his 'theatre' aims to educate the audience to produce civil subjects, it remains uncertain how wide the spectatorship can be. Burke's distance from the 'multitude' was manifested in his defence of parliamentary politics in the Wilkite controversy of the 1760s. John Brewer argues that the new 'political nation' constituted by the press and its popular readerships, not only materialised the widened political participation but also the 'alternative structure

Charles were either laughed or hissed.' *Politics for the People*, 2 vols. (1793–95, rpt. New York: Greenwood, 1968), I: 377–79. See also Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories*, 97.

of politics' in opposition to 'the enclosed world of institutionalised politics' like the parliament.⁷⁰ Burke adheres to this meritocratic principle in the 1790s. His distrust of the popular readership is reflected in his mode of address in the form of private letter, creating a sense of the staging of an 'enclosed world'.

The radical ridicule finds its voice in the interstices of the polite and conservative discourse of comedy. The structure of the polite model of comedy, as I have constantly reiterated, usually finds its 'humourist' in the scenes of common life, his manner and character being at odds with the rest of the company or even the world. Radical humour, on the other hand, by obscuring 'character' and highlighting the crowd, exploits and remakes the figure of the comic humourist in contrast with the collective social organization. The figure of 'open theatre' is in a sense structured by this relationship between the 'humourist' and the world: the political show is presented as if it loses touch with the public, thereby affording amusement for the rest of the company.

To achieve this radical theatrical aesthetic, however, the disseminative and diffusive nature of the form of print can be very effective. Eaton's pamphlet *The Pernicious Effects of the Art of Printing upon Society, Exposed* (1793), which exploits the division between the higher and lower order, illustrates this point.⁷¹ As one of the best wits in popular radicalism, Eaton's comic satires and parodies vividly put much of the Paineite open theatre into practice. Earlier in the year,

⁷⁰ John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 15-17, 21, 158-60.

⁷¹ It is presumably written by Eaton himself, though the fact that it is unsigned leaves the authorship open.

Eaton had been tried and acquitted twice for printing *Rights of Man* and for the ‘gamecock’ joke. These events were good reasons for the complacency expressed in *Pernicious Effects*. In this short parody, Eaton impersonates an author addressing ‘the friends of social order’ on the alarming rise of mass print culture that endangers social hierarchy and enables the lower orders and women to take part in political process and assume equal rights to their social superiors. What unsettles him is the effacement of the boundary between public and private by print, most notably the exposure to the public of what should remain private among the ruling class. Failure to keep the multitude in ignorance shakes the social order. The desperation of the author eventually ends up with a self-cancelling proposal that climaxes the comic effect: ‘Let all Printing-presses be committed to the flames—all letter foundries be destroyed—schools and seminaries abolished—dissenters of every denominations double and treble taxed—all discourse upon government and religion prohibited . . . and lastly, issue a proclamation against reading and burn all private libraries.’⁷² These proposals are based on acknowledgement that printing is employed ‘as the medium of diffusing sentiment’.⁷³ The anxiety shown by this parodic author is quickly turned into a Paineite comicality in which the ‘diffusion of sentiment’ is here simultaneously an unintentional diffusion of popular laughter. With dramatic irony, the author proposes several clandestine measures which are not

⁷² D. I. Eaton, *The Pernicious Effects of the Art of Printing upon Society, Exposed*, 15. For another useful discussion, see Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 161-62.

⁷³ Eaton, *Pernicious Effects*, 8.

expected to work once they are disclosed in print:

To carry some part of this plan into execution, it would be necessary to employ spies and informers, which by many (Jacobins and Republicans) are thought to be signs of a weak or wicked and corrupted government; they say, that governors, conscious of acting for the public good, of having it only in view in all their measures, would scorn using such unworthy and dishonourable means. I cannot be of this opinion, but am confident, that if the measures I have proposed be but speedily adopted . . . the lower orders would mind their work and [remain in] that desirable state of ignorance. . . .⁷⁴

Eaton's ventriloquist voice constantly sabotages reactionary discourse, so that its agenda and argument seem to lose their credibility the moment they are uttered. The comic effect emerges in the contradiction that, while the target readers for the speaker appear to be the elite, the publication itself is clearly a mass-targeting pamphlet (sold at the price of two pence). This parody thus manoeuvres the speaker into a comical wrong footing, as if he is placed on the stage of an 'open theatre' where he thinks he addresses an oligarchic private world without being aware of his exposure to public spectatorship. Of course, judging from the nature of its publication, Eaton seems to ignore the possibility of a loyalist crowd in the readership, and subscribes to the typical radical dichotomy of the people versus the government. Nevertheless, Eaton exercises this radical rhetoric powerfully by burlesquing the Burkean literary form of the private letter, displacing the

⁷⁴ Ibid, 15-16.

Burkean persona from private social circle to open stage. The comic irony Eaton appears to aim for is one in which the parodic author is made to address a small circle of audience while the majority of the readers are allegedly the multitude unable to sympathise with him.

The eruption of the comic technique that generally falls into the mode of Paine's 'open theatre' reflects the growing perception that the ruling class is losing its grip on the populace, so that it can be mocked and dismissed in the belief, contrary to Burke's, that the fall of the ruling class does not lead to negative collective consequences. Paine's *Rights of Man* is imbued with this kind of optimistic triumphalism, which I have suggested above in the example of the trope of Quixotism. During late 1794 and 1795, in the wake of the acquittals of many leading radicals from high treason, which marks the temporary triumph of republican politics, a wealth of humorous print on the government and monarchy mushroomed in a variety of forms, including handbills, broadsides and advertisements, on the streets as well as on radical newspapers such as the *Courier* and the *Telegraph*. This literature of mock-advertisement, which has been rediscovered by John Barrell, elaborates upon 'open theatre' by representing the activities of the King and the government as spectacles and entertainments, including plays, pantomimes, ceremonial processions, magic-shows, and so on.⁷⁵ The booming of mock-sermon also draws scholarly attention, as an elaboration of the Open Theatre in a broad sense, in which the

⁷⁵ See John Barrell, "'An Entire Change of Performance?'" The Politicisation of Theatre and the Theatricalisation of Politics in the mid 1790s', *Lumen*, 17 (1998): 11-50; and Barrell (ed.), *'Exhibition Extraordinary!!': Radical Broadsides of the Mid-1790s* (Nottingham: Trent, 2001).

pulpit is turned from an educative medium to a parodic object of the mass audience.⁷⁶ There is little space to examine this body of texts in detail or address their difference and diversity in rhetoric and symbolism in this chapter; but I nonetheless want to point out briefly the shared trope in these texts in response to loyalism, the trope that in general agrees with Paine's, with which he responds to Burke. A common technique in these texts is to represent state rituals as comic shows that compare politicians to magicians, and their activities to magic-shows. What these mock-advertisements show are that the public political rituals, contrary to Burke, do not bear on substantial public interest because they are simply tricks. A popular feature is the caricature of William Pitt's dramatic persona as 'Signor Gulielmo Pittachio', after the renowned Italian illusionist of the time Giuseppe Pinetti, implying Pitt is a political mountebank. Later on, the targets extend to the King, Burke and Henry Dundas.⁷⁷ These mock-advertisements echo Paine's derision concerning 'the puppet-show of State and Aristocracy' that the multitude is arbitrarily 'thrown into' (1: 267). In these parodies, the smooth affective continuum from the ruling class to its mass spectator is absent, or is replaced by the comic disconnection generated by the chasm between a theatrically isolated object and its laughing spectators. These mock-theatres in the open air deliberately misplace the Platonic cave of

⁷⁶ See Peter Denney, 'Popular Radicalism, Religious Parody and the Mock Sermon in the 1790s', *History Workshop Journal Issue*, 74 (2012), 51-78.

⁷⁷ A seminal broadside of this theme is *Signor Pittachio*, attributed to the radical poet Robert Merry. For more discussions, see Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire*, 83-85; Jon Mee, 'The Political Showman at Home'; Barrell, 'An Entire Change of Performance?', and Barrell, *Exhibition Extraordinary!!*, texts no. 3-8, 12, 14.

phantasm. Barrell points out that the originality lies not in conceiving politics as theatre, but in finding a new way of representing political theatre in the medium of print so it can be more accessible to half-literate audience in their everyday life in the tavern and on the street.⁷⁸ These parodic prints therefore exemplify a radical (in-)version of the polite model of comedy, generated by the incongruity of the ruling-class individuals not in the common life of the domestic middle class, but that of the lower orders in the tavern and on the street.

An outstanding example of the radical disruption of communal affective tie is *Admirable Satire on the Death, Dissection, Funeral procession, and Epitaph, of Mr. Pitt* (1795).⁷⁹ This anonymous satire on William Pitt, first published in the *Telegraph*, takes the reader behind the scene to see Pitt on the deathbed of his private home. It presents a parody that gives ‘details’ of Pitt’s final days surrounded by his friends in a tone of mock-pathos. The author constantly sabotages this pathetic scene with incongruous plot details to render sympathy from the readers impossible (or, sympathy is not expected at all because of the readership of this radical newspaper). Pitt asks George Rose, then Clerk of the Parliaments, to recall his good deeds, but Rose, ludicrously, can remember nothing but his ‘crimes’. After Pitt’s death, the author tells of a hilarious postmortem examination of Pitt’s body. Pitt’s cranium, tongue, neck, heart, lungs and liver are microscopically dissected in order to understand how the wicked character of Pitt is constituted. What the reader is presented with is an

⁷⁸ Barrell, ‘An Entire Change of Performance?’, 29.

⁷⁹ *Admirable Satire on the Death, Dissection, Funeral procession, and Epitaph, of Mr. Pitt* (London, 1795), reprinted from *Telegraph* (20, 21 and 24 Aug. 1795).

extraordinary and ‘singular’ constitution: the tongue’s smoothness and strange hollowness inside explains his deceptiveness and emptiness; the frozen lump of liquid in his heart shows his coldness; the superabundance of dark bile in his liver his explains his biliousness; and so on.⁸⁰ This passage may benefit from the eighteenth-century medical discourse of the physiological determination of individual character, and can therefore be traced to the early discourse of the ‘humourist’ made by his imbalance of bodily fluids — in this case, Pitt’s excessive bile. Indeed, this piece transforms Pitt from an object of pity into an amusing humourist. It may also allude to, ridicule and refute, Burke’s pathetic aesthetic of approaching the ‘wounds of a father’ with fear and pity. By presenting the body as an individual, singular case, the mock autopsy of Pitt not only expresses a gleeful irreverence towards his body but also appears to reject Burkean social organicism in which a person in power can be synecdochical to the body politic as a whole. The rejection of the link between a private elite and public interest is further expressed in one of the last developments of the story: ‘A monument, we understand, is to be erected, at the public expense, to perpetuate this Great Man’s memory’.⁸¹ The monument does not symbolise a national tie but, ‘at the public expense’, represents the *privatisation* of public funds. At the end of this parody, the author laments the lack of respect and pity from the multitude:

It is with grief that we advert to the behaviour of the *mob* on this occasion.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 11-13.

⁸¹ Ibid, 15

Neither respect for the memory of the deceased, nor hunger itself, (which appeared in most of their countenances) could restrain their levity from breaking out into shouts of laughter and indecent merriment'.⁸²

In this mass disrespect in laughter, Pitt is symbolically isolated, treated as a private figure who has lost his grip on the multitude. Laughter here is not only a declaration of popular independence and political subjectivity. It is also, in spite of (or because of) their 'hunger', their display of solidarity.

Burke and Paine's far-reaching dispute beyond the confines of practical political matters such as the choice between monarchy and republicanism opens up questions concerning the very constitution of social life itself. Their comic ridicules of alternative sociopolitical systems bring the satiric function of humour back to the foreground. Popular radical humour in its attack on the political establishment embodies a peculiar combination of Hobbes and Hutcheson. Their political humour employs the aesthetics of 'character' in the 'incongruity' paradigm of the eighteenth century, but without the mores and ethos that sustained this paradigm. Its disagreement with Burke's comic ethics reflects the content of 'common life' in contestation. Moreover, its expression of confidence and volition in 'common sense' in laughter differs markedly from the eighteenth-century comic tradition, founded on the theory of human imperfection and finitude, and expressed in the description of social ineptitude, fallibility, despair of transcendence, and Sterneian acceptance of mortality. At the end of the decade, these themes were to be reclaimed and defended by a literature of

⁸² Ibid.

counter-revolutionary humour to which I will return in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3

‘Inoffensive Sport’ and Political Criticism in John Wolcot

Richard Newton’s ‘Treason!!!’ appeared in 1798. Around that time he produced a number of caricatures on George III. It is certain that Newton’s royal satire benefited both substantially and stylistically from the most popular verse satirist of the King, John Wolcot, better known by his pseudonym ‘Peter Pindar’. He dedicated one print in 1798 to Wolcot, whom he lauded as ‘that Prince of Satirists’.¹ Although it is likely that anyone wishing to lampoon the King would find Wolcot a natural inspiration, it is still remarkable that the popular radicals in particular was associated with such a satirist as Wolcot. It is not only because Wolcot did not engage very fervently with radical activities of the 1790s, but also because his approach to laughter and humour does not seem at the first glance conducive to radical causes. As I will discuss in this chapter, Wolcot frequently stresses the freedom of laughter as an end in itself, without any hint at subversion even if it is directed at the political establishment such as Monarchy. I have noted in the Introduction that this is exactly what Newton’s caricature claims. But I have also noted that the ‘disinterested’ amusement in the 1790s was part of political contestation. In this regard, there is hardly a better case in point than the controversy over the work of Wolcot, whose rhetoric notoriously plays

¹ ‘An Atlas, or the Strong Man!!!’ (1798), BM 1868,0808.6688. See also David Alexander, *Richard Newton and English Caricature in the 1790s* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery in association with Manchester University Press, 1998), 51.

on the ambiguity between joke and propaganda. This chapter is concerned with how an ‘innocuous’ practice of humour without determined political leaning can lie at the heart of political controversy in the 1790s.

Wolcot’s satire targets a range of political and cultural institutions, although it was the satire on the King that dragged him into political controversy and threats of government prosecution. When he finally renounced royal satire in 1796 owing to heightened pressure on him by the government, Wolcot argued that the government overreacted to laughter, even though his satire was directed at the King: ‘behold, there is death in the joke/ That squinteth at Queen or at King’.² He protests forcefully that his lampoon is innocuous:

A harmless joke on King and Queen;
A little joke on lofty Earls and Lords;
Smiles at the splendid homage Court scenes;
The modes, the manners, sentiments and words;

A joke on Margaret Nicolson’s mad Knights;
A joke upon the shave of cooks at Court;
Charms the fair muse, and eke the world delights;

A pretty piece of inoffensive sport. (3: 428)

The ‘inoffensive sport’ is a familiar disclaimer that humour does not necessarily entail a subversive agenda. Wolcot’s satire is characterised by light

² John Wolcot, *Liberty’s Last Squeak*, in *The Works of Peter Pindar, Esq.*, 5 vols. (London, 1812), 3: 417. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from Wolcot are from this edition, and are given in the main text with the volume and page numbers. For Wolcot’s renunciation, see below, p. 171, and n. 47.

yet scurrilous mockery of his targets' personal foibles. *The Lousiad* (1785-95), his *magnum opus* of royal satire, exposes the King to ridicule not by an account of his public deeds, but by a dramatisation of trivial domestic events conducted in a traditional mock-epic manner. It presents a farce of frenzy caused by the King's melodramatic consternation at the discovery of a louse on his dinner plate. Blaming his cooks and ordering them to be shaved, he provokes the cooks to rebel in an equally mock-epic fashion. In this work, as well as his other verse satires on the King, the King is ridiculed for his coarse manner, his speech pattern (consisting mainly of inarticulate monosyllables), and such defects of personal character as a lack of taste, reasoning, sociability and amiability. In other words, Wolcot saturates his political satire with trivial human comedy. Isaac D'Israeli's response to *The Lousiad* exemplifies a typical dismissal of Wolcot by his contemporary critics, when he asserts that Wolcot's satire '[s]wells a small foible to a monstrous crime'.³

Notwithstanding Wolcot's 'inoffensive sport', he could not escape political controversy in the 1790s and the government attempt to silence him. It may well be because of the contemporary construal of the King's behaviours since late 1788 as symptoms of madness, rather than porphyria as modern retrospective diagnosis has it. His 'madness' was the occasion for the Regency crisis that continued well into the 1790s, and satires on the King, however innocuous the authors may claim, became particularly political sensitive. Wolcot's caricature of

³ Isaac D'Israeli, 'On the Abuse of Satire', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 59 (Jul. 1789), 648. See below for more discussion of this text.

the King's manners and tempers in his poem may well be read as mockery of the King's madness, and is therefore subversive in the sense that the King's mental condition displayed in everyday business disqualifies his reign. Also, Wolcot supported the Prince of Wales to replace George III (before the Prince actually did), and perhaps had a little political sympathy with the Foxites.⁴ That said, I will not reduce Wolcot's satire to a specific textual production responding a specific political event. I have argued that political humour in the 1790s involves a complex ideological framework that goes beyond *ad hoc* political commentaries. Wolcot's satire represents the King as a laughable character in the quotidian affair (in other words, 'common life'), and is therefore germane to the terms of political controversy of the 1790s I have been focusing on. As we shall see, Wolcot's work and the controversy it provoked at the end of the century resonate with this categorical tension between (human) comedy and (political) satire in the practice of humour.

This indicates the difficulty of reading his politics. Wolcot's targets of ridicule include the court, lords, Poet Laureates, the Royal Academy, the Royal Society, the government under Tory Prime Minister William Pitt, and, above all, King George III. He also wrote for the *Morning Post*. Such literary credentials may categorise Wolcot as a radical poet. He provoked loyalist attacks from the *British Critic* and the *Anti-Jacobin Review* and from conservative literati including Isaac D'Israeli, Thomas Mathias, Richard Polwhele, and William

⁴ See his elegy to Charles Fox, Richard Sheridan and Sir Francis Burdett, Later in his *Tristia* (1806), in *Works*, 4: 337, however, Wolcot seems to think that these individuals have capitulated to the political establishment.

Gifford.⁵ Yet Wolcot also spent some of his early years in France, and returned to England with a resolute contempt for French culture in general. When the French Revolution started Wolcot voiced counter-revolutionary sentiments. Although he was associated with radicalism for his acquaintance with William Godwin and the Treason Trialists, he remained distant from radical activism and related societies.⁶ It is of little surprise, then, that modern scholarship has come to contradictory construals of his politics as radical as well as loyalist.⁷

The objective of this chapter is not to provide another judgment on Wolcot's politics, nor is it to reopen the case by a close and extensive reading of Wolcot's work *per se*. Further, this chapter does not read Wolcot's frivolous or 'comic' style of satire as a self-conscious 'strategy' of political polemic, partly because it may risk committing intentional fallacy while downplaying the facetious playfulness of his language. It is more so because the complexity of the context in which he is writing does not always guarantee that his 'strategy' leads

⁵ D'Israeli, 'On the Abuse of Satire'; Mathias, *Pursuits of Literature*; Polwhele, 'A Sketch of the Private and Literary Character of John Wolcot [sic], M. D., Commonly Called Peter Pindar'; Gifford, *Epistle to Peter Pindar*, all discussed below.

⁶ For his lukewarm attitude to radical reform, his friend Cyrus Redding once reports that, in attending a meeting of the Friends of the People, 'Wolcot, who was more of an aristocrat than a Jacobite [sic] of that day, was really not one of the disaffected, though he would not suffer his self-assumed betters to think for him. He attended the meeting out of curiosity'. See Redding, 'Dr. Wolcot', in *Past Celebrities Whom I have Known*, vol. 1 (London, 1866), 257-58.

⁷ For 'radical', see e.g. Iain McCalman, 'John Wolcot', in McCalman (gen. ed.), *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture, 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 766. For 'loyalist', see Tom Girtin, *Doctor with Two Aunts: A Biography of Peter Pindar* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), 108. Fenella Copplestone regards Wolcot a 'self-avowed Tory' in favour of constitutional monarchy: see her introduction to Peter Pindar, *Laughing at the King: Selected Poems* (Manchester: Fyfield, 2009), 12.

to the result he may have desired. Instead, this chapter pursues two questions: first, why Wolcot invites confusingly diverse ideological exegeses while his satire very often proves difficult to read in any determined political term; and second, why his ‘inoffensive sport’ is mired in political controversy and what his case can tell us about the political climate that affects the practice of otherwise ‘innocuous’ humour. This chapter uses Wolcot’s satire on George III as an index to one of the central concerns in this study with regard to how humorous expression problematises political judgment and the terms of controversy. I emphasise that it is the interaction between his work and his context that registers the significance of his work as a symptomatic case in point of the ongoing controversy between satire and comedy in a politically-charged milieu of the 1790s.

In this chapter, I consider three aspects that can illustrate the polyvalence of political humour which Wolcot’s work and its receptions display. First, with regard to the political system, the changing style of monarchy in Britain under George III, who sought to fuse his two constitutional ‘bodies’: the political and the personal. This transition enables Wolcot’s royal satire to fuse human comedy with political satire. Second, Wolcot’s literary outputs renewed an eighteenth-century controversy between ‘Juvenalian’ pointed satire and ‘Horatian’ general comedy. The ambiguity of situating Wolcot’s work between Horace and Juvenal can in a sense mirror the confused approaches to political questions of the time. Third, Wolcot’s attitude about humour itself reveals how his language of bathos seeks to maintain a critical distance from what Wolcot

perceives as stylistic extravagance in *both* the French Revolution and the British establishment. Unlike Chapter 2 and 4, this chapter does not attempt to provide explication for the political purpose in the use of humour but to raise questions about the ways in which the ambiguity of humour itself reflects the ambiguities in aspects of the political reality of the 1790s. I will also make some suggestions, through a reading of the controversy surrounding Wolcot, about the ways in which laughter for laughter's sake can be as politically dangerous (for the loyalists at least) as laughter generated by a specific and politically subversive agenda. For example, as I will show, laughter for pure amusement is for the loyalists such as William Gifford and the *Anti-Jacobin Review* an encouragement of popular anarchy.

3.1 Human Comedy and Royalty

Recent studies by Linda Colley, Marilyn Morris and G.M. Ditchfield, among others, have persuasively rejected past impressions of the reign of George III as a continuation of the decreasing relevance of monarchy in the British state and politics. Despite the Hanoverian settlement that empowered Parliament over the monarchy, and with the loss of America that deteriorated monarchical credibility, these scholars argue that, by the end of the century, monarchy has renewed its political relevance by extending its influence into hitherto uncharted

cultural and religious spheres of common people's life.⁸ The royal efforts to reinvent the monarchy's political relevance include an attempt to close the gap between royalty and the whole nation outside royalty. Or, in other words, the task the monarchy took upon itself was to close the gap between the elite and demotic, 'common life,' according to Samuel Johnson's definition I mentioned in Chapter 1. As a *person*, George III sought to close the gap between what constitutional theory has conceived of as the King's two bodies, regal and mortal, the former being a political symbol for the state and the latter indicating a private individual.

In the course of a gradual discrediting of the theory of divine right, which privileges the regal body, the King faced greater resistance to reigning with his regal body alone.⁹ It became vital that the monarchy construct an image of itself through which the mortal body clearly represented the regal body. Royalty sought to reinvent its majestic aura not only by splendour and pomposity but also by familiarity, as it tried to sell George III as a humanised, ordinary 'Farmer George' who could endear himself to the populace and turn himself into a cultural icon. To assist this project, George III exercised more frugality in the court. As John Barrell puts it, the King 'needed to be both sublime and beautiful,

⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), ch. 5; Marilyn Morris, *The British Monarchy and the French Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998); G.M. Ditchfield, *George III: An Essay on Monarchy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁹ For a useful account of the history of divine right, see Morris, *British Monarchy*, 13-17, 102-09.

to rule by fear and to rule by love'.¹⁰

As Barrell understands it, this development in monarchical tactics is symptomatic of the broader change in the political milieu of the late century. The universal politicisation Barrell identifies concerns the government's attempt to extend its reach into aspects of what in Johnson's term can be identified as 'common life'. The domesticated image of the King is a significant part of this process, as the King endeavours to synchronise the rhythm of the life of royalty with that of the common people.¹¹ In this sense, Johnson's idea of common life, as the life of the common people rather than the (political) elite, experiences a major attempt by the royalty to change its political semantics from a demarcation between elite and low life to their convergence.

Marilyn Morris observes that public scrutiny of the character of the King, in reaction to Burkean 'decent drapery' that sought to exempt the King from such scrutiny, did not serve to undermine British royalty: 'tearing off the "decent drapery" actually served to humanize the British monarch and to pave the way for the social role it has come to play in modern culture'.¹² This observation implies the tension generated by the very attempt at the fusion of the two bodies. Given Morris's observation of the humanisation of the King, the omission of Wolcot in Morris's book is curious. Wolcot writes that 'Monarch now is proved a *human* thing, / Although it lifts its nose to such a height' (3: 197). Wolcot's

¹⁰ John Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 111.

¹¹ Ibid, ch.3.

¹² Marilyn Morris, *British Monarchy*, 12.

words reflect how the old constitutional theory, in which the King's private, 'human' persona is politically irrelevant and beyond reproach, was being rejected in George III's reign.

Wolcot concurs with the rejection of the theory of divine right: 'I said, a Cat may look upon a King: / But foreign Potentates say: "No such thing" / Sicilia's King, replete with *right divine* / Thinks he may hunt his Subjects like his Swine' (3: 197). Vincent Carretta's study of the satire on George III observes that the gradual and continual discrediting of the King's divine right to reign made the principle appear increasingly lopsided on his human body. Following the discrediting of divine right (although it still existed), indeed, more attention to the mortal, fallible character of the King implies that the once separate symbolic realms of the two bodies became increasingly different to demarcate. For Carretta, satire on George III in the late century took on his private character, which was considered responsive to his political and personal virtue.¹³ In this sense, the conflation of the two bodies lends itself to political and interpretive ambivalence.

Colley's argument concerning George III's 'apotheosis' in the 1780s and 1790s precisely hinges on the King's effort to popularise royalty by embracing his personal body. Commenting on George III and his satirists, Colley writes:

[L]aughter takes the stings out of criticism. And laughing at royal individuals led in practice very easily to amused tolerance for royalty itself.

¹³ Vincent Carretta, *George III and the Satirists from Hogarth to Byron* (Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

Those who satirize the British Royal Family today, lampooning their corgis, their reputed philistinism, their funny clothes and their even funnier accents, may imagine they are being subversive, but, of course, they are not. The shift in criticism of the monarchy which first became apparent in the 1780s, a shift away from anger at the institution to mockery of individual royals and their foibles, helped — as it still helps — to preserve it.¹⁴

Carretta concurs with this view, pointing out that the royal satirists, among whom Wolcot is a prominent example, focus on minor foibles, while they are unable to find faults of ‘real substances’ in the King.¹⁵ In my view, this historical judgement may not be easy to verify, since it is uncertain if the King’s subjects were sufficiently well-versed in constitutional matters to distinguish between his political and personal bodies. There was a risk that a lampooning of his personal body would be construed as an attack on the political system itself, especially when the King was generally considered mad.

My reconsideration does not seek to refute these judgements altogether, as it is inappropriate to overestimate the power of laughter in bringing about actual political change. Nevertheless, I want to note that such judgments may be based on an implicit critical assumption that the constitutional theory of the King’s two bodies corresponds to a rhetorical economy which neatly demarcates the register of ordinary life from that of the political. The co-presence of the King’s two bodies is ambiguous; either it suggests the fusion and imbrication of the two, or a

¹⁴ Colley, *Britons*, 210.

¹⁵ Carretta, *George III*, 269-73, 180.

carefully demarcated balance between them which can be read without confusion. If the King should become too amiably domestic and humbly ordinary, for example, it may threaten the loss of meaning of the monarchy as such. For example, the loyalist newspaper *The Sun* is at times caught in such dilemma between its keenness to promote the King's domestic affability, and its misgivings about the decline in reverence for the monarchy.¹⁶ The fusion between the 'sublime' and the 'beautiful' King could also entail the collapse of the two symbolic registers, and consequently the collapse of a political system. As Barrell argues, the lampoons directed at the King's individual character were losing their political innocence in the crisis years of the mid-1790s. Barrell extends his long scholarly concern with the tricky relationship between the private and the public in the eighteenth century to his inquiry into the politics of the 1790s, determining that the line between the two continued to blur. He argues that, while in the beginning of the century it was only public and not private virtue that was under public scrutiny, private character in the 1790s became increasingly hard to distinguish from public character, as the former was emerging into the public limelight for public judgement.¹⁷ Arguably, Wolcot's

¹⁶ For *The Sun*'s coverage of the King's mien as a caring paternal figure, see *Sun*, 12 Feb. 1796, quoted in Marilyn Morris, *British Monarchy*, 170. There was another article on *The Sun* which attributes the revolutionary turmoil to the crisis of the constitution, which results from continuing limitation of the power of the Crown. It seems to champion some kind of return to the pre-1688 condition in which all sources of political power stably 'emanate' from the Crown. It argues that the confused use of 'language' is largely responsible for the crisis of political piety, as the language becomes somehow alarmingly close to the lack of rule in the language of 'common life'. See *The Sun*, 25 Dec. 1795.

¹⁷ Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*, 91-96.

innocuous humour became politically sensitive in the 1790s because of these changes in the reigning style in response to the fear of republicanism.¹⁸

For Barrell, Wolcot was not committed to republicanism, although his treacherously facetious monarchism still posed a greater threat to the court and the government than any republican proclamation (had there been any). This was because Wolcot's irreverent ridicule of the king had the potential to encourage his readers to disrespect the court and the government in the crisis years, when 'disaffection from the war and sympathy for the poor were both running high'.¹⁹ Barrell reports that Wolcot was threatened with government prosecution, and was involved in petitions against the government passing of the Treasonable Practice Bill, against which he wrote protest poems, not least *Liberty's Last Squeak*.²⁰ With regard to the ideological dimension of Wolcot's potential subversiveness, Barrell quotes Paine's 'open theatre', which Wolcot can be said to have used often to expose the private faults of the King to public spectatorship. Paine's passage of the 'open theatre' was specified as subversive at the treason trial of Daniel Eaton, who was tried for publishing Paine's *Rights of Man*, which helps explain why Wolcot's satire also proved alarming to the government.²¹

What I take from Barrell's analysis is his insight that the monarchy's attempt to reach out into the private realm of national life could turn into confusion about whether this new style of governing aims at the *fusion* of or the

¹⁸ Ibid, ch. 3. See also Marilyn Morris, *British Monarchy*, ch. 8.

¹⁹ See Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*, 137-38.

²⁰ Ibid, 138-43.

²¹ Ibid, 143.

balance between the personal and the political. Barrell uses *The Royal Tour, and Weymouth Amusements* (1795), a mock-epic about the King's public excursion in 1789 to the Weymouth resort, to illustrate Wolcot's criticism of monarchical tactics. The King's Weymouth tour was meant to improve his recently recovering health from porphyria, or the alleged 'madness', and to simultaneously cultivate his accessible public image. In the poem, Wolcot cracks a series of jokes about the King's botched attempt at humanisation and ironically reveals his selfish impertinence. Whereas Barrell's focus is to question through Wolcot's caricature the efficacy of George III's effort to soften the monarchy by establishing his private virtue, I consider how this confusion of the private and public realm can be read in terms of the increasing relevance of human comedy to contemporary political culture. I seek to show that Wolcot's comedy of chaos mirrors the very chaos of the political system evidenced by monarchy.

Wolcot adds in *Royal Tour* a sarcastic dedication to the then Poet Laureate Henry James Pye, attacking what Wolcot perceived as a sycophantic bootlicking of royalist literary practices, by masquerading himself as a sycophant: 'May Kings exist, and trifle Pigs with Kings! / The Muse desireth not more *precious* things! / Such sweet *mock-grandeur*! so *sublimely* garish!' (3: 321). Wolcot argues that the mock-epical comedy/farce of the King is already a reality that does not require literary invention: '*Such* want no praise; in nature virtues strong: / tis *folly, folly, feeds* the Poet's Song' (ibid.). My point is that the transformation of the character of the British state in general and the transformation of monarchy in particular suggest one significant way in which human comedy

becomes politically sensitive. Wolcot constantly reiterates claims of this kind: that the comic chaos of royalty derives not from his satirist's literary interpretation but from royalty itself, which, instead of rendering itself more humbly accessible and loveable to its subjects, reveals the very ridiculousness and unworthiness of its current King.

Wolcot opens *The Royal Tour* with a scene of local frenzy at the King's arrival, as ordinary people and even wildlife leave their normal course of being to welcome and gain sight of the king. Wolcot uses mock-heroic technique of hyperbolic exaltation in order to suit the sublimity of royalty:

Squat on his speckled haunches gapes the toad,
And frogs affrighted hop along the road;
The hares astonish'd to their terror yield,
Cock their long ears, and scud from field to field;
The owl, loud hooting, from his ivy rushes;
And sparrows, chatt'ring, flutter from the bushes:
Old women (call'd 'a pack of blinking b—s'),
Dash'd by the thundering light horse into *ditches*,
Scrambling and howling, with post—rs pointed,
(Sad picture!) plump against the Lord's Anointed.
Dogs bark, pigs grunt, the flying turkeys gobble;
Fowls cackle; screaming Geese, with stretch'd wing, hobble;
Dire death his horses' hoofs to ducklings deal,
And Goslings gape beneath the burning wheel! (3: 325-26)

The same comic hyperbole is employed again in the other royal tour satire (1796), which describes the farcical mania of the crowd swarming into the city, pressing round like ‘pancakes’ simply to have a view of the King (3: 467-68). This representation of comic chaos has its specific political valence. Rather than expressing the vitality in the chaos constituted by the indistinguishable mass of the crowd in the caricature of Rowlandson, Wolcot depicts a chaos generated by one specific individual (the King) and continues to single out the King as the character incongruous to his surrounding.²² The King’s arrival ironically marks a suspension of ‘common life’ as rural people have to temporarily abandon their daily business.

Wolcot’s satire illustrates how the royal effort to bridge the gap between the King and his subjects does not work. The implication is either that it accuses the King of an unsuccessful execution of the attempt, or that it argues that this very policy of the humanisation of the monarch is not justified. In his satire, Wolcot seems more often to suggest the latter. The *Royal Tour* offers examples of this nature in comic episodes where a number of politicians approach the King to discuss state affairs, while the King is trying to enjoy his private tour. The King tries to dismiss Frost, the King’s bailiff at Windsor, when Frost approaches:

FROST, FROST, no politics — no, no, FROST, no:

You, you talk politics! oho! oho!

.....

²² For Rowlandson’s graphic satire as expressing the vitality of the chaos of the urban crowd, see Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, esp. ch. 2.

Pull WINDSOR down? hae, what! — a pretty job!

WINDSOR be pull'd to pieces by the mob!

Talk, talk of farming — that's your sort, d'ye see;

And mind, mind, *politics* belong to me. (3: 330)

George III's softened and domesticated public image is presented here not as his endearment with the commoners but as a negligence of his public office. The narrative plot continues to disturb the King's effort to escape from public business. Politician after politician, including Frost, Pitt, George Rose, Joseph Banks, and a number of Lords, approach him with state affairs that require his attention, but are rebutted. At one point in his trip, the King attempts to join Lady Cathcart's private reading in an affectedly affable manner, only to be frustrated by the revelation that she is reading of the war of America (1: 334).

Throughout the poem, Wolcot presents a King who constantly fails to distinguish between public and private, or political and personal affairs appropriately. The King's private frugality, for Wolcot, involves misunderstanding of the nature of monarchy. *Peter's Pension* (1788), for example, affixes a tale of the king's attempt to sell carrion in place of mutton at Fleet Market, as an illustration of his miserliness.²³ Wolcot's scurrilous anecdote interestingly suggests that the King's private virtue may result in public harm. Indeed, the evolution of private deeds is tricky in that it is often motivated by private interest, and the King's frugality may be viewed as vice if it is meant to

²³ See *Works*, vol. 2.

protect his private interest at the expense of others.²⁴

Perhaps Wolcot wants to argue that the King's effort to assimilate himself with ordinary people is in the wrong direction of governing. An oft-quoted proclamation suggests that Wolcot's hostility towards the King owes more to the King's failure to display monarchical qualities than to the unviability of the political system as such: 'Far from despising kings, I like the breed, / Provided *King-like* they behave'.²⁵ In addition to Barrell's observation that Wolcot's satire targets the King's forays into ordinary life, or 'invasion of privacy', I would add that the satire may also urge the monarch not to demean himself with ill-conceived tactics, and to restore a Kingliness that does not require meddling with his subjects. In this sense, the 'human comedy' of the King and his people mirrors what for Wolcot is a political chaos: I suggest that one dimension in which human comedy gains a political and moral character lies in this mode of literary representation exemplified by Wolcot.

Conspicuously, in order to represent the chaos the monarchy inflicts upon the political establishment and itself, Wolcot's satire generally adopts mock-epic techniques that exploit a misalignment of the sublime and the trivial, either by hyperbolic portrayal of the King's minor foibles or by transformation of comic incidents into wild farce. In this sense, Wolcot's satiric technique sits well within the mock-epic tradition of Alexander Pope. The sarcasm he directs at Henry

²⁴ Charles Pigott defines 'Prudence and Oeconomy' in his *Political Dictionary* as 'an increase of taxes at the conclusion of an expensive war; and languishing that treasures upon profligate favorites which should be applied to discharge the public debts of the nation'. Charles Pigott, *Political Dictionary: Explaining the True Meaning of Words* (London: D. I. Eaton, 1795), 107.

²⁵ *An Apologetic Postscript to Ode upon Ode*, 18.

James Pye's empty panegyric to royalty may recall *Peri Bathous*, while allusions to *The Rape of the Lock* can be found in *The Lousiad*.²⁶ For Howard Weinbrot, Wolcot writes in the shadow of Pope, but is more lopsided in style in comparison to Pope's successful synthesis of satiric paradigms of Juvenal and Horace.²⁷ While such judgement is possibly true regarding the internal history of satire, the practice or application of such familiar technique to the political reality of the late century adds new dimensions of political meaning. Wolcot's 'comical' satire reflects changes in political culture, as it evolved from partisan sectarianism to universal politicisation, through which the meaning of the private and the public is reconstituted. As a result, Wolcot becomes involved in the renewed controversy of two satiric traditions, those of Horace and Juvenal, a debate which became politically charged in the 1790s.

3.2 The 'Horatian', the 'Juvenalian', and the Political Controversy between the 'Satiric' and the 'Comic'

In 1789, the young Isaac D'Israeli attacked Wolcot in his early poem 'On the Abuse of Satire'. It was addressed to the Poet Laureate Thomas Warton, who had appeared in Wolcot's satire. The piece affirms Warton's Laureateship as a

²⁶ On Pye, see, for example, *Instructions to a Celebrated Laureat* (1790), in which Wolcot recommends Pye praise the Monarch about trivial subjects such as 'Economy, Poultry, Cow-Pens, Pigs, Dunghills, &c.', in *Works*, vol. 2; *The Royal Tour, or Weymouth Amusement* (1796), in *Works*, vol. 3. For allusion to *Rape of the Lock*, see Canto V, *Lousiad*, 2: 314-15, when Zephyr saves the louse from the King and stores it with Belinda's lock of hair.

²⁷ See Howard Weinbrot, *Alexander Pope*, 357.

symbol of poetic orthodoxy and poetic standard, while castigating Wolcot's vulgarisation of 'Impartial' satire by taking excessive pleasure at libeling his target:

We love thy mirror; when bold truth exhorts
But hate the witty malice that distorts.
When the rank vices, and flagitious times
Provoke the satirist, and inflames his rhimes
A just applause should crown the deathless page
Where wit Horatian tempers Juvenal's rage.²⁸

The last line recalls the scholarly formulation of two eighteenth-century 'traditions' of satire based on the receptions of Horace and Juvenal.²⁹

The syntax of D'Israeli's line suggests that Wolcot fails to strike a decorous balance between the two modes as his work is perceived as disproportionately Juvenalian. I have recounted the traditional rules of satire in which rage is assigned to deal with vice and laughter with minor faults such as folly. In the eighteenth-century discourse, the Horatian and Juvenalian principles apply accordingly. James Beattie in his *Ludicrous Composition* suggests that the different tonalities of Horace and Juvenal correspond to moral principles regarding targets of different natures: 'These poets had different views, and took different subjects; and therefore it was right that there should be a difference in their manner of writing. Had Juvenal made a jest of the crimes of his

²⁸ Isaac D'Israeli, 'On the Abuse of Satire', 648.

²⁹ See my brief account in Chapter 1 Sec.1, and references to Howard Weinbrot, *Alexander Pope*; W. B. Cronochan, 'Satire, Sublimity, and Sentiment'.

contemporaries, all the world would have called him a bad writer and a bad man. And had Horace, with the severity of Juvenal, attacked the impertinence of coxcombs, the pedantry of the Stoics, the fastidiousness of luxury, and the folly of avarice, he would have proved himself ignorant of the nature of things, and even of the meaning of his own precept'.³⁰ On this account D'Israeli's problem with Wolcot's style appears to lie in his confusion of decorums, with too much unprovoked Juvenalian castigation being laid on a 'small foible'. Wolcot's specific targeting is redolent of a Juvenalian bent. During the 1790s, however, reviews of Wolcot's work, including his own self-judgement, were far more inclined to regard it as un-Juvenalian and sometimes even overly Horatian. His comic frivolity, fondness for trivial banter and concentration on minor human faults and foibles strike notes that may be closer to the Horatian paradigm. According to a biographical source, General Tadeusz Kościuszko of Poland, an admirer of Wolcot, described his work as 'a couple of bottles of Italian wine ... the wine of Horace'.³¹ Wolcot's verse works frequently quote Horace as inspiration for occasional points, and produce imitations of Horace. In 1792 he confidently claims literary alliance with the Roman author: 'Horace . . . that Bard divine, / Whose wits so *fortunately* jump with mine.'³² At the turn of the century, however, a 'revival' of the satirical tradition of Juvenal led by conservative literati William Gifford, Thomas Mattias, and the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, attacks

³⁰ James Beattie, *Ludicrous Composition*, 395.

³¹ See Cyrus Redding, 'Dr. Wolcot', in *Past Celebrities Whom I Have Known* (London, 1866), 1: 253.

³² *The Remonstrance*, in *Works*, 2: 460. See e.g. 2: 115-27.

satiric works such as Wolcot's that they consider to indulge excessively in Horatian laughter while bracketing moral concerns.³³

In what follows I will not dwell on the detail of the Horace-Juvenal controversy *per se*, but on its political implications, which inform my reading of the controversy in which Wolcot was involved. In literary critical history, the eighteenth-century discourse on the two modes of satire has usually been cast in ethical terms, which might account for why its political character has received relatively little scholarly attention until recently. Yet it is not far-fetched to identify implicit political allegories in the figures of the two Roman satirists. As a court poet, Horace aligns himself closer to a private elite society, his tone of conciliation and amiability reflecting the ethics of private intimacy. Wolcot claims: 'The World should say of Peter Pindar's strain, / "In him the courtly Horace lives again / *Circum praecordia Petrus ludit*' (2: 236). Juvenal, on the other hand, establishes himself as a voice of public-oriented opposition in an age of moral decline, and was banished for his conflict with the court. Wolcot's own friction with courtly culture and the cultural establishment underlines D'Israeli's implicit distinction between Wolcot and Juvenal. The figure of Juvenal may in this sense account for Wolcot's subject position as an oppositional satirist. However, the 'Horatian' content, which consists of ridicule of 'small foibles' in the private life of the political elite, lies behind D'Israeli's indictment that 'small foibles' of the King are swelled to the level of 'monstrous crime' as private fault

³³ For the 'revival', see Gary Dyer's discussion of the satire of Gifford, in his *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789-1832*, ch. 1. See also below for further discussion of Dyer's book and the controversy between Gifford and Wolcot.

is exposed to public spectatorship in print. It is possible, however, that D'Israeli was unaware that Wolcot perhaps simply *described* the present reality of the monarchy that blurred the boundary between public and private, so that a confused Juvenal-Horatian approach might be counterintuitively appropriate. As the monarchy continued to blur the boundary between the 'human' and public characteristics of the King, Wolcot's satiric performance evidences how a Juvenalian intent of pointed political criticism could be more effective in mixing with the Horatian approach to 'small foibles'.

Wolcot's case thus offers us a vantage point into the renewed controversy over the satiric ethics of the two traditions. Gary Dyer has traced the political resonance of the Horace-Juvenal controversy into the period of revolution, in his *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789–1832*. Dyer is unhappy with the stylistic dichotomy of Horace–Juvenal, which oversimplifies the practical diversity of satire in the period, and proposes a third category, 'radical' satire, which is partly derived from Wolcot's legacy. Dyer's use of the adjective 'radical' denotes a pluralistic, Bakhtinian and critical subversion that is equally distant from the monological conservatism of the Juvenalian model and the conciliatory, and therefore non-polemical, Horatian model. Dyer is led to assert that Horatian satire 'ultimately is anti-political'. On the other hand, 'radical' satire is as politically confrontational as the Juvenalian, but, unlike the latter, is critically subversive of the *status quo*. This formulation informs Dyer's reading of Wolcot's satire, and his conclusion that Wolcot's legacy in the early

nineteenth century ‘split into two branches, Horatian and Radical’.³⁴ Although Dyer’s alternative formulation does help reconsider the limitations of the binary formulation of Horace and Juvenal, it may also underestimate its inner ambiguity. The judgement that ‘light raillery’ is politically disengaging may be true, but does not inevitably lead to the conclusion that it is apolitical. Dyer continues: ‘Even if [Wolcot’s satire] does deal with parliamentary politics or class conflicts, it spreads blame so evenly as to weaken its call for reform, while its tone defuses tension, reducing injustice to only another manifestation of eternal human imperfection’.³⁵ However, I have also argued that themes of human comedy reshape political rather than apolitical languages. In the case of Wolcot, as in the cases of all the works and writers I have discussed, the manifestation of human imperfection has a political resonance in its own right. As Wolcot writes in *Liberty’s Last Squeak*:

But wherefore not laugh at a —— [Queen]?
 And wherefore not laugh at a —— [King]?
 A laugh is a laughable thing,
 When people are silly and mean.
 When we Paid civil List without strife,
 When we paid the old Quack for his cure,
 When we pray’d at Peg Nicholson’s knife,
 The K—— laugh’d at Us, to be sure.’ (3: 418)

³⁴ Gary Dyer, *British Satire*, 41, 37.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

In the former stanza, 'laughter' is understood as something of an end in itself ('A laugh is a laughable thing'), justifiably indiscriminate to the 'silly and mean' in any individual regardless of their rank. The dashes in the first two lines and the impersonal 'people' seem deliberately to abandon political pointedness to the 'eternal' human comedy, but the stanza that follows ironically assures its readers that such laughter is understood as a symbolic triumph of the powerless in retaliation for forms of political oppression in which 'The K[ing] laugh'd at Us'. One could also read the two stanzas as mutually complementary 'Horatian' humour and 'Radical' subversion, but judging from the flow of the rationale it seems more difficult to separate the 'radical' implication from the Horatian statement itself.

Wolcot had written earlier that 'Rank is a farce—if people fools will be, / A scavenger and kings the same' (2: 43). This statement vividly illustrates the connection of comedy to human follies and its implication for social hierarchy. Further, the statement contradicts the demarcation between human comedy and political satire. Loyalists could still accuse the 'impersonal' human comedy of impropriety and political danger when it came to a sensitive political subject. William Gifford contends in his translation of Juvenal in 1803 that even disinterestedness can be politically and morally subversive, because it holds moral questions and public duties in suspense: 'To raise a laugh at vice . . . (supposing it feasible,) is not the legitimate office of Satire, which is to hold up the vicious, as objects of reprobation and scorn, for the example of others, who

may be deterred by their sufferings.’³⁶ Laughter for Wolcot, on the other hand, is only an expression of civil freedom, hurting none but entertaining many.

This defensive argument, however, was in the eyes of some conservatives the very offence of political infidels. As Gifford continues: ‘To laugh even at fools is superfluous; — if they understand you, they will join in the merriment; but more commonly, they will sit with vacant unconcern, and gaze at their own pictures; to laugh at the vicious, is to encourage them; . . .’³⁷ For Gifford, to soften the severity of morality is itself a severe moral offence; to do it with laughter, is to put the whole social order in danger. Gifford took it upon himself to restore and reaffirm, as Dyer observes, the satirist’s ‘faceless public office’ of moral rectification.³⁸ Dyer properly reads this passage as Gifford’s Juvenalian-moralist disapproval of laughter’s alleged moral levity, but seems to gloss over it as an expression of a loyalist overreaction concerning the insufficiently political or subversive practice that (Horatian) laughter constitutes. Yet it is worth pointing out such unprovoked fear does indicate a real change of perception of political order: the phrase ‘they will join in the merriment’ conjures up a vision of collective disorder, while ‘they will sit with vacant unconcern, and gaze at their own pictures’ may imply the collapse of social order under the weight of moral nihilism. Another (anonymous) hostile response to Wolcot

³⁶ ‘An Essay on the Roman Satirists’, in William Gifford (trans.), *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* (London, 1802), xlviii. See also Dyer, *British Satire*, 41.

³⁷ Gifford, ‘Roman Satirists’, *ibid.*

³⁸ Dyer, *British Satire*, 36.

asserts that his jokes ‘lay the Monarch level with the clown’.³⁹

The anxiety concerning ‘leveling’ in laughter can be contextualised in terms of the general fear of political chaos in radical expression in the 1790s. Radical literature of the Revolutionary period also employs the language of light, ‘trifling’ humour when addressing politically sensitive issues. This arbitrary association between a bathetic attitude to power and the determination to annihilate that power appears historically familiar when we recall the ‘figurative treason’, explored by John Barrell, that was transforming British political language.⁴⁰ As we have seen, radical satires of the King such as ‘King Chanticleer’ and ‘Treason!!!’ disclaim political pointedness by taking shelter in the supposed ‘innocence’ of amusement.⁴¹ This example may serve to complicate Dyer’s formulation of the contrast between the conciliatory humour and radical satire, and encourages us to consider the paradox of being simultaneously jocosely good-natured *and* subversive.

Although Wolcot’s humour is not particularly associated with the political programmes and democratic ideology of radicalism, his controversy does demonstrate anxiety regarding laughter for its own sake rather than laughter for a

³⁹ Anon., *Peter Not Infallible! Or, a Poem, Addressed to Peter Pindar, Esq. on Reading His Nil Admirari, a Late Illiberal Attack on the Bishop of London; Together with Unmanly Abuse of Mrs. Hannah More. Also Line Occasioned by His Ode to Some Robin Red-Breasts in a Country Cathedral* (Cambridge: printed by M. Watson, and sold by Chapple, Cadell and Davies, and Rivingtons, London, 1800), 10.

⁴⁰ Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death*; see also Introduction, p. 4.

⁴¹ Richard Newton, ‘An Atlas, or the Strong Man!!!’ (1798), British Museum manuscript 1868,0808.6688. See David Alexander, *Richard Newton and English Caricature in the 1790s* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery in association with Manchester University Press, 1998), 51.

moral or political purpose. Gifford's contention lies precisely in the conviction that the act of taking shelter in the morally neutral comic frame of language is even more politically ominous than the use of laughter to articulate morally and politically subversive projects. What for loyalists and counter-revolutionaries is scandalous is the implication of anarchy in non-tendentious laughter; in other words, because free laughter seems to fall outside of the scope of politics itself in the age of crisis, it simultaneously implies that it falls outside of political control as well, at a time when control is desperately needed according to loyalist agendas. From the late 1780s onwards, there were efforts by Wolcot's hostile readers to identify the purpose behind his seemingly autotelic facetiousness. D'Israeli in 'On the Abuse of Satire' understands Wolcot's vulgarisation of literature as a writing for profit in the mass reading market: 'The Bard a trader! his art a trade'.⁴² Later, he put it more bitterly by calling Wolcot 'The dirty Prostitute of half-a-crown'.⁴³ The implicit pun on 'crown' is also found in another commentary on Wolcot's poems, which 'sell . . . for a Crown'.⁴⁴ In around 1787-89, when Wolcot was involved in rumours that he satirises the government to blackmail for state pension, local newspapers feature a number of attacks, which regard Wolcot as a mercantile opportunist. One poem reads:

I think I know thee, Peter — Thou'rt a Thing,
That for a Guinea could be wondrous civil;
Would praise alike a Cobler or a King,

⁴² D'Israeli, 'On the Abuse', 648.

⁴³ D'Israeli, 'A Defence of Poetry', *Specimens of a New Version of Telemachus* (London, 1790),

⁴⁴ Anon., 'To Peter Pindar', *St. James's Chronicle* (21 Aug. 1787), n. p.

Or damn, for Gold, a God, or bless a Devil.

If thou art poor, there may be some Excuse.

Here — take these Pence to help thee on thy Way;

But let us have no more of thy Abuse:

Poor little Doggy thou hast had thy Day.’⁴⁵

The obvious rationale here is that a pecuniary incentive sidelines the poet’s moral concerns. Indeed, such apprehensive vision as ‘God’ damned, ‘Devil’ blessed, and ‘a Cobler and a King’ praised alike, anticipate the misgivings of the conservative cultural elite in the 1790s concerning the social chaos caused by the republic of letters. The loyalist journalist John Taylor, friend of Wolcot, speculates on the motivation for Wolcot’s intrepid satire on the King: ‘I have often wondered at the boldness of his attacks on the royal character, and his general license of satire, as he was naturally, by his own acknowledgement, by no means of a heroic disposition; but he was seduced by popular favour and its consequent pecuniary profit’.⁴⁶ Wolcot himself often playfully confirms his critics’ suspicion that he was writing for profit, exploiting popular appetite for gossips of the political elite. In response to a loyalist attack from Robert Jenkinson, Lord Liverpool, Wolcot quips: ‘You’ll say, “Let satires meaner subjects look.” / Well, Jenky, grant my satire flies at you, / Who’d buy my melancholy vulgar books? / Adieu fair fame, and fortune’s smiles adieu!’ (2: 230). Financial metaphors such as the ‘fund’ in ‘Lo, with a fund of *joke* a court

⁴⁵ Anon., ‘Brother Paul to Peter Pindar’, *St. James’s Chronicle* (10 May 1788), n. p.

⁴⁶ John Taylor, *Records of My Life* (New York, 1832), 1: 299.

abounds' (1: 532) run through the self-defences in Wolcot's work. Jokes on great personages sold well: 'were I to write on common folks / No soul would buy my rhymes so strange, and jokes: / Then what becomes of mutton, beef and pork; / How would my masticating Muscles work?' (1: 454). By claiming his intention to write simply for profit without subversive agenda, Wolcot apparent attempts to justify himself in depoliticising rhetoric. Of course, it is the very profit-oriented popular literary market that alarmed loyalists because of its potential 'levelling tendency' which put indiscriminate amusement ahead of respect for social hierarchy. What is interesting here is that in this very depoliticising rhetoric Wolcot may also secretly harbour his political indictment of the King's unjust financial principle, which involves misdirected funding for 'sinecures' and 'sycophants' rather than a free-speaking artist like Wolcot, which I shall discuss in the next section.

Wolcot's 'Horatian' aspects, however, did not cover up Wolcot's otherwise Juvenalian bent. His pointed satire was directed bluntly at the King and other public figures, and could not convince the government and the loyalists that the work was merely driven by 'inoffensive sport'. The government, along with loyalists acting on its behalf, negotiated with Wolcot during the time when Parliament was also pushing for the passing of the Treasonable Practices Act. In 1796, they eventually succeeded in forcing Wolcot to reluctantly discontinue his royal satire and to renounce his pension.⁴⁷ Despite his satiric voice being

⁴⁷ For an account of Wolcot's renunciation in which the loyalist paper *True Briton* and Wolcot's friend John Taylor plays an important part, see Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*, 138-42.

censored on the subject of the King, Wolcot refused to give up his satire altogether. He then applied the same comic techniques to his satire on the prominent Bluestocking, Hannah More, and her admirer, Bishop Beilby Porteus, in *Nil Admirari, or Smile at a Bishop* (1799). His critics became convinced that such comic license had been carried too far. *Nil Admirari* caused a more intense and acrimonious controversy in Wolcot's career than his royal satires ever did. The title draws on the Horatian tradition ('nil admirari' literally means 'to be surprised by nothing'), and the content includes a good deal of scurrilous and ribald jokes about More, as well as the bishop, jokes which her defenders considered outrageously libellous. Wolcot entertained the theory that More and her flatterers may have been involved in 'Crim. Con.'. ⁴⁸ 'Miss Hannah may be aptly term'd a *hen*,

Who sits on pheasants' eggs, to kindness prone:

Hatches the bird, a pretty brood; but then,

Weak vanity! She calls the chicks *her own*'

.....

And, what our good opinion *must* inspire,

With bishops she could *talk* from morn to night.

⁴⁸ *Nil Admirari*, in *Works*, 4: 269. Gillian Russell has tackled the much politicised private issue of adultery ('criminal conversation'; 'crim. con.') in the case of Thomas Erskine's courtroom performance as 'proscenium arch for the 1790s' that 'could destabilise boundaries between the private and public, masculine and feminine, the familial and the social, rulers and ruled'. Gillian Russell, 'The Theatre of Crim. Con.: Thomas Erskine, Adultery and Radical Politics in the 1790s', in Michael T. Davis and Paul A. Pickering (ed.), *Unrespectable Radicals?: Popular Politics in the Age of Reform* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 57-70 (66).

Oh! Had *good* Hannah been not so severe

On each young Victim of her tempting bloom!⁴⁹

Wolcot's *ad hominen* jokes at More's expense unsurprisingly provoked moral outrage among loyalists and Wolcot's former sympathisers. These diatribes assert that Wolcot had, in their view, taken the liberty of humour to excess, to the extent that even the regulatory moderation in the Horatian tradition, such as urbanity, modesty and amiability, is lost in those outrageous slanders on More. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* quickly published a scathing review. The reviewer, going by the pseudonym 'Anti-Profanus', was convinced that Wolcot's literary entertainment would lead to catastrophic consequences, arguing that Pindar was not only forgetting, but also 'absolutely perverting, the very object of satire — the correction of vice'.⁵⁰ Again singling out the moral irresponsibility of facetious (Horatian) humour, which enacted a dangerous form of levelling, the review imagined Wolcot 'bribing the servants of his Sovereign to betray their trust, to reveal his family secret, and to expose all those little foibles from which no man upon earth is exempt, in order to render them objects of public derision and scorn; recollecting, no doubt, that the regicides of France attempted to render their Sovereign ridiculous before they ventured to murder him.'⁵¹ Richard Polwhele fully concurred.⁵² The position confirms Barrell's conjecture that

⁴⁹ Ibid, 4: 269.

⁵⁰ *The Anti-Jacobin Review* (November 1799), also quoted in William Gifford, *Epistle to Peter Pindar*, 3rd ed. (London, 1800), 9.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Polwhele, Richard, 'A Sketch of the Private and Literary Character of John Walcot [sic], M. D., Commonly Called Peter Pindar', in *The Unsex'd Females; a Poem, Addressed to the Author*

laughing at the King encouraged dangerous irreverence — at least existed in the loyalist imagination.⁵³ William Gifford continued this conservative censure with *Epistle to Peter Pindar* (1800) and approvingly reproduced most of the passages from the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, along with harsh ridicules of Wolcot's works. In a later *Anti-Jacobin Review* of *Nil Admirari*, it is claimed that '*Wit* may, I admit, be so blended with *profaneness*, as to make it difficult not to be struck with the one, at the same time that we hold the other in abhorrence'.⁵⁴ An anonymous response printed in the journal claimed its author to have been Wolcot's admirer, who found his works: 'possessed an original, . . . *inexhaustible* vein of humour; the keenness of the satire was much softened by the playfulness of the manner, and the severest strokes appeared to be so void of malignity, that in many cases they ceased to offend, where they were known to be unmerited'. For this commentator, Wolcot had successfully tempered 'keenness of the satire' with 'playfulness of the manner', but late works such as *Nil Admirari* manifested the degeneration of the humour of Peter Pindar who, 'upon the indulgence of the public', and like 'a spoiled child . . . seems to think that *every thing* he *says must*

of *The Pursuits of Literature*. By the Rev. Richard Polewhele. To which is Added, a Sketch of the Private and Public Character of P. Pindar (New York: Reprinted by W. Cobbett, 1800), 64. A chunk of the passage in the *Anti-Jacobin* review reappears verbatim in Polwhele without citation; therefore it is reasonable to conjecture that the review was probably penned by Polwhele himself.

⁵³ See again Barrell's *Imagining the King's Death*, which argues the idea of treason extends beyond actual plotting into literary and figurative imagination.

⁵⁴ *The Anti-Jacobin Review* (Jan. 1800), 80-81.

be witty'.⁵⁵ This judgement implies that Wolcot's humour had lost control not only of its Juvenalian pungency but also its Horatian amiability. It is no surprise that some rejoinders and counterblasts to Wolcot's *Nil Admirari* contain ridicules of, or scandals about, Wolcot's private character.⁵⁶ For Gifford, in *Epistle to Peter Pindar* (1800), Wolcot's attack on More and himself affects his literary expression so deeply that it lapses into the tiresome venting of unrestrained spleen. He deems Wolcot's satire 'ebullition of frenzy' by an 'unhappy dotard' who '[l]ashes his wither'd nerves to tasteless sin'.⁵⁷ These statements provoked Wolcot to assault Gifford with a baton outside a bookshop in London's Piccadilly later in the year, only to be overpowered by his younger adversary. The event sparked derisive and triumphalist accounts of Wolcot's humiliation in loyalist periodicals such as the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, which reports Wolcot's humiliation before a crowd of 'lovers of fun to whom [Wolcot's] melancholy story [and] his lamentations excites nothing but the mirth of his audience.'⁵⁸ Wolcot was, in its eye, a 'profligate poetaster', a 'literary monster', 'all filth and

⁵⁵ *Pindarics; or an Ode of Lamentation, Addressed to Peter Pindar, Esq. On his Nil Admirari, or a Smile at a Bishop. And a disquisition concerning the Crasis of Peter Pindar's Blood, and Its Effect upon His Labours Exemplified* (Bath: G. Robbins, 1800), [iii].

⁵⁶ *The Pindarics*, 13-39, features a bizarrely comic section of a hypothetical diagnosis of Wolcot's physical disorder that is alleged to account for his reproachable assault on More. Richard Polwhele in his 1800 edition of *Unsex'd Females* (re-published by William Cobbett) added an attack on the 'private and literary character' of Peter Pindar. Richard Polwhele, 'A Sketch of the Private and Literary Character of John Walcot [*sic*], M. D., Commonly Called Peter Pindar', in *The Unsex'd Females; a Poem, Addressed to the Author of The Pursuits of Literature. By the Rev. Richard Polewhele. To which is Added, a Sketch of the Private and Public Character of P. Pindar* (New York: Re-printed by Wm. Cobbett, 1800), 51-68.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 75, 80, 82.

⁵⁸ See, for example, *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* (Aug, 1800), 466-68 (67).

venom', a 'baleful pest', whose scurrilous attack on the King and the establishment's literati was driven by unprovoked malignity and spleen that few would care.⁵⁹ Wolcot struck back in print quickly with *Out at Last!* (1801), which features another *ad hominem* derision of the low origin of Gifford and Thomas Matthias as cobblers (4: 331). Meanwhile, the incident of Wolcot and Gifford's brawl became a news sensation and provided comic material for the mock-heroic satire *The Battle of the Bards* (1800), in which Wolcot the satirist ironically became a subject of public entertainment.⁶⁰ Indeed, in this series of embittered exchanges, the Horatian-Juvenalian conflict between Wolcot and the conservative literati seems to be confused if not inverted. Wolcot's self-avowed Horatian persona was compromised by his recourse to violence, which rendered him closer to 'Juvenalian' acrimony, whereas loyalists (though not including Gifford) achieved their retaliation by laughing back at Wolcot, thereby taking liberty to indulge in some sort of apolitical entertainment.

This confusion between Horace and Juvenal in the controversy over Wolcot's works at the end of the century, particularly in the controversy over *Nil Admirari* and its aftermath, shows that the moral and political terms of the dispute struggle to define itself when it comes to Wolcot's role in political literature either as a political satirist or as a morally irresponsible jester. In the present frame of terminology, perhaps neither of the two political allegories —

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Anon. ['Mauritius Moonshine'], *The Battle of the Bards* (London: Lackington, 1800). Kenneth Hopkins, *Portraits in Satire* (London: Barrie Books, [1958]), 257, attributes this poem to the Irish poet Thomas Dermody.

Juvenalian moral polemics and Horatian good-natured raillery — can be snugly applied to Wolcot’s case. My point, however, is not to dismiss this traditional binary formulation as useless for understanding Wolcot’s case, but to demonstrate how the confusion of the Horatian and Juvenalian characteristics in Wolcot’s satire points to the complexity of the personal and the political in the 1790s. The Juvenalian mode is considered more political than the Horatian mode by critics such as Dyer because of its more specific moral commitment and specific political agenda. However, in the 1790s when political languages are increasingly complicated by universal terms which move beyond partisanship into ontological questions of order and anarchy, morality and pleasure that shaped the controversy between conservatism and radicalism, a Horatian ‘general’ approach can prove more politically ominous, as shown in the abovementioned criticism of Gifford and the *Anti-Jacobin Review*.

On the other hand, Wolcot’s scurrilous, personal, ‘Juvenalian’ jokes may recall the manner of the equally scurrilous satire on celebrities, *The Jockey Club* (1793) and *The Female Jockey Club* (1794), by the problematic radical pamphleteer Charles Pigott.⁶¹ For Jon Mee, Pigott’s case illustrates the point that the idea of ‘debate’ about revolution obscures the radical nature of writings not

⁶¹ For Pigott, see Nicholas Rogers, ‘Pigott’s Private Eye: Radicalism and Sexual Scandal in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 4 (1993), 247–63; Jonathan Mee, ‘Libertines and Radicals in the 1790s: The Strange Case of Charles Pigott I,’ in Peter Cryle and Lisa O’Connell (eds.), *Libertine Enlightenment* (Basingstoke, 2004), 183–203, and “‘A Bold and Freespoken Man’: The Strange Career of Charles Pigott,” in David Womersley (ed.), *“Cultures of Whiggism”: New Essays on English Literature and Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century*, (Newark, New Jersey, 2005), 330–50.

substantiated with elaborate polemics against political principles, but with performative rituals by opposition such as Pigott's scandalmongering to discredit his political enemies.⁶² On the other hand, Pigott's persistent exposure of the private faults of the aristocracy exemplifies again the changing terms and the criteria of political virtue, which provides radicals with alternative zones of engagement and problematises any easy delimitation of the ideological scope of radical argument. As radicals also utilised presumably innocuous gossip about the elite private life as byways for political struggle, Wolcot's own fondness for directing this type of joke toward figures of the establishment can therefore hardly avoid a reading of his work as seditious or immoral libel, as the abovementioned conservative reviews testify. Furthermore, if Wolcot's 'humour', which for some of his contemporary readers was already established as 'Horatian', ironically turned more narrow-mindedly personal, more 'Juvenalian', then it should be because his 'Horatian' practice cannot be exercised in a sedately apolitical milieu which hardly existed in the 1790s. Given that Wolcot confronted threats of government prosecution and attacks from hostile critics, Wolcot was forced into a position where he compromised his Horatian amiability with vehement, more 'Juvenalian', defences of his belief in 'inoffensive sport'.

Satirising the private life of the ruling class was certainly a popular approach to political criticism at the end of the century, but the case of Wolcot, I want to argue here, is associated with another dimension of cultural politics. Although both Wolcot and Pigott register their political critique in ridicules on

⁶² Mee, 'A Bold and Freespoken Man', 339-40.

private characters, Pigott does not emphasise as constantly and superlatively as Wolcot does the significance of humour in addressing political questions. Taking this into consideration, I suggest this is another key aspect that makes Wolcot a special political case, which is difficult to be subsumed into either loyalist or radical discourse. I will discuss in the last section Wolcot's emphasis on humour as essential to political criticism.

In Wolcot's case, moral controversy corresponds to stylistic controversy. In the *Nil Admirari* controversy, the exchange of assaults between Wolcot and his critics was often conducted in terms of the quality of writing as well as the scurrilous content. In the satire Wolcot bluntly explains what he targets in More: 'I own Miss Hannah's Life is *very good*; / But then, her Verse and Prose are *very bad*' (4: 261). Gifford's *Epistle to Peter Pindar* is comprised mostly of assessments of Wolcot's style: 'He has the power of rhyming ludicrously, and is sometimes even gifted with poetry; and finally he is puffed up with a vanity and self-conceited importance, almost without a parallel'.⁶³ In his *Out at Last!* (1801), Wolcot footnotes a lengthy appraisal of the quality of Gifford's writing, lambasting his lack of 'originality', 'luxuriance of imagery', 'awkward and obscure inversions, with a verbose pomposity, from the leading features of almost every couplet' (3: 496). These literary quarrels illustrate a key development of the political controversy of the 1790s, which, as it is well known, was characterised by its extension into the cultural realm, and marked by the

⁶³ *Epistle to Peter Pindar*, in John Strachan (ed.), *British Satire 1785-1840* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 72n.

increasing fusion of party politics and cultural politics.

Paul Keen's *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s* offers important accounts of the process of establishment of a cultural institution known today as 'literature' as a result of contemporary political controversy. His new historicist approach sheds light on how the value and scope of 'literature' was contested in a time of proliferation of writing, when increasing promiscuity of readership sparked controversy over the political consequences of the changing republic of letters.⁶⁴ Keen's literary-political landscape includes Gifford, Thomas Matthias, Polwhele, D'Israeli and Hannah More, all of whom, as we have seen, were involved in controversy with Wolcot on literary and political issues. Satirists and critics, such as Gifford, are no doubt a case in point; Gifford made his name in the early 1790s with satires on the Della Cruscan poetry in the hope of a Tory re-establishment in literary orthodoxy, as well as his own literary authority, in order to rectify public taste.⁶⁵ Wolcot, on the other hand, is perhaps a hitherto unrecognised case in point. This is perhaps due to, in addition to Wolcot's ambiguous politics, the hitherto underexplored significance of humour as a literary critique of politics. While Keen explores the demographics of the republic of letters — on the questions of who writes, who should write, and who should be disenfranchised from the republic, my discussion of Wolcot considers

⁶⁴ Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature*, esp. ch. 1 and 2.

⁶⁵ For Gifford's (Tory) establishment of his own literary authority and an attempt to rectify public taste by thus lampooning the sentimental school of poetry represented by the Della Cruscans, see Michael Gamer, "'Bell's Poetics': *The Baviad*, the Della Cruscans, and the Book of *The World*", in Steven E. Jones (ed.), *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 31-53.

the stylistics that provokes interpretation of the republic's class meanings. Coming from a middle-class background, Wolcot's coarse jokes on the political and literary elite struck his contemporary critics as pandering to be vulgar and disqualifying a respectable man of letters. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* characterises *Nil Admirari* as a 'low . . . Grub-Street attempt'⁶⁶; while Wolcot attempted to defend himself against implications that he wrote as a hack (2: 20; 2: 451). The reluctance to sell his work at low prices also reflects his reservation for popularising, at least on this count.⁶⁷

In order to distinguish himself from both the establishment writers and Grub Street, Wolcot made an idiosyncratic extension of the idea of 'hack' by entertaining the oxymoron of a court hack, whose fortune depends on low-quality sycophancy for his royal patron, as the hack writer depends his on his low-quality ephemera for his hirers.⁶⁸ Wolcot can be said to attempt to exercise the role of a man of letters, albeit not of a kind of Gifford and Matthias. Yet Wolcot shares with Gifford and Matthias the notion that political order depends on literary morality: but whereas Gifford insists on solemnity, Wolcot privileges humour and laughter, which he believes to be corrective rather than

⁶⁶ *Anti-Jacobin Review* (Jan. 1800), 80.

⁶⁷ Wolcot's name was associated with the democracy of reading in the 1790s: one of Wolcot's imitators, one 'Peregrine Pindar', produces a paean to popular publisher James Lackington: *Ode to the Hero of Finsbury Square* (London, 1795). Yet Wolcot spared few good words for Lackington, whose cheap-selling policy, for Wolcot, were demeaning to the elite writer: 'I dare say the sad Bookseller, a Lane / Or Lackington, pour'd such unhallow'd sounds / On Milton's shrinking ear, with Lips profane, / Who bought th'immortal works for *fifteen pounds* . . . The price actually given for the *Paradise Lost*!' (4: 135, 135n).

⁶⁸ See, for example, 2: 20, 2: 451-452.

anarchic as Gifford perceives it. On this point, I shall turn in the final section to Wolcot's justification of his humour as a literary ethics of critical distance from forms of political corruption. I shall demonstrate through Wolcot's discourse the ways in which humour is regarded as an essential method of political criticism while being equally distant from loyalist and radical rhetorics.

3.3 Comedy as Literary and Political Critique, and British 'Liberty'

I have suggested that Wolcot can be said to belong to the broader controversy of the juncture of literature and politics in the 1790s, and I have outlined the particular perspective through which I approach the decade's conditions as they affected the reception of Wolcot's satire, in relation to changes in monarchical image and the debate between Horatian and Juvenalian modes of satire. These developments indicate the ways in which 'human comedy' in private life finds its political relevance. Yet the accessible comic language, which consists of coarse and indecent caricature of the private character of the elite, strikes the loyalist critics as stylistic demagoguery. That demagogic language may inspire the 'unrespectable' popular radicals (such as Newton). But I have also mentioned that Wolcot is distant from radicalism, and I want to point out that this reservation partly results from his view on humour. This section turns to Wolcot's literary critique of the function of humour that touches on the broad themes of human comedy — human finitude and fallibility, reflected in foibles and faults in the worldly context. Wolcot's satire includes critique of forms of

excess, facile transcendence, and false ‘sublimity’, which, according to Wolcot, plagues both French radicalism and British loyalism, and the comic attitude is the common antidote.

Although trained as a physician, he showed interest in fine art, music, and literature. He achieved fame as a cultural critic, as his first satires were on the Royal Academicians whose artistic qualities were under Wolcot’s scathing mockery.⁶⁹ It appears that Wolcot’s engagement with politics started with this cultural corruption as he perceived it. In the sarcastic *Odes to Royal Academicians*, he expresses strong distaste for the work of Benjamin West, who succeeded Joshua Reynolds, the artist Wolcot admired, as the new President of the Academy. Wolcot was convinced that the appointment of West by the King evidenced the King’s lack of artistic taste.⁷⁰ He was also increasingly critical of the Academician’s sycophantic style which, Wolcot perceived, indicates the general sycophantic milieu among the cultural establishments of George III, including his court, the Poet Laureateship, and so on. One scholar proposes that Wolcot’s work can be associated with the transition from the personal panegyric, a main feature of the literature of patronage, to satirical ironies, when literary readership was changing throughout the eighteenth century.⁷¹ A derogatory keyword that articulates Wolcot’s opposition to the rhetorical performance of loyalty in the literature of patronage is ‘flattery’. Wolcot castigates the excess of

⁶⁹ *Odes to the Royal Academicians* (1782-85), in Wolcot, *Works*, vol. 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid, *passim*; see also Robert Vales, *Peter Pindar (John Wolcot)* (New York: Twayne, 1973) 26-29.

⁷¹ See Jeanne Griggs, ‘Self-Praise and Ironic Personal Panegyric of Peter Pindar’, *Age of Johnson*, 8 (1997), 223-24.

flatteries in the court as well as among the social elite as a literary corruption that entails a political consequence, ‘an ivy wriggling round an oak— / This oak is often honest, blunt John Bull’. As a poison in disguise, ‘a pretty ornament’,

Master Ivy creeps into John’s guts;

And gives poor thoughtless John a set of gripes:

Then, like an organ, opening all his pipes,

John roars; and, when to a consumption drain’d

Finds out the knave his folly entertain’d.’ (1: 390)⁷²

Wolcot’s employment of a metaphors of the body is linked to his profession. He has specifically attributed flattery to court ‘sycophants’, which represent corruption at the centre of power. Such detestation recalls the eighteenth-century satiric tradition from Pope to Charles Churchill, which often couches political degeneration in terms of literary sycophancy: Churchill had written of ‘smooth-tongu’d flatt’ry, that curst *court-disease*’.⁷³ The metaphor of John Bull’s sick body as synecdochically allegorical to the health of the public body, furthermore, recalls Bolingbroke’s metaphor for republican rule that ‘Liberty is to the collective body, as health is to individual body’.⁷⁴ The causality also travels the other way: it is the political framework that provides a hotbed for

⁷² Cf. *Expostulatory Odes* (1789), 2: 213: ‘The love of flatt’ry is the soul’s rank mange, / Which, though it gives such tickling joys, / Instead of doing service, it destroys: / Just as the mange to lapdog’s skins apply’d / Though pleasing, spoil the beauty of the hide.’ See *Expostulatory Odes*, new ed. (London: G. Kearsley, 1789), 34.

⁷³ Charles Churchill, *The Night* (1760), in Douglas Grant (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 55.

⁷⁴ Bolingbroke, Henry St. John, *Idea of a Patriot King*, in David Armitage (ed.), *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 244.

flattery and results in a vicious reciprocity, as Wolcot's ridicule of the Poet Laureateship attests. Wolcot's *Lyric Odes to the Royal Academicians* (1782-86) argues that, in addition to the King's tasteless decision to appoint Benjamin West, the Academy's cultural mission to promote arts and sciences is corrupted by political sinecures, bad taste and royal intervention.⁷⁵ Wolcot argues that the King should fund free-spoken artists like Wolcot, rather than courtiers and sycophantic artists, if the present political system wants to do well: 'Friend to the Arts, were George's millions mine, / What heavenly maid in poverty should pine? / For labouring Genius, palaces should rise;/ Not for Court-sycophants, the Carrion-flies' (3: 395). The King is portrayed not only as a foolish but also as miserly character, failing to fulfil his duty to fund the liberal arts and sciences, and surrounded by mediocre sinecures.

In this regard, we may understand Wolcot's comic ridicule better as a corrective than as subversion. *The Remonstrance* (1791), a poem written in the midst of controversy over Wolcot's alleged sympathy with the French Revolution, contains a manifesto that is at once literary and political. Wolcot insists that his principles are radically opposed to those of the French and that his national loyalty cannot be doubted. He reiterates the rationale that his rhetorical disloyalty is in line with the constitutional spirit of liberty, while condemning the French version as pathological. Thus he describes the enthusiasm for the Revolution as 'An ugly Inflammation of the Brain', and diagnoses the French problem in the capacity of a physician, who offers a cultural antidote 'to calm the

⁷⁵ *Works*, vol. 1.

hurry of the mind, / And bring you back to common sense again.’⁷⁶ *The Remonstrance* demonstrates Wolcot’s arguing an unusual position in the literature of the 1790s, one which places the British establishment and French radicalism on the *same* side. Both, for Wolcot, are versions of what can be understood as a false ‘sublime’, or what he perceives as the ‘bombast’ of style. Wolcot uses comic deflation to expose the empty extravagance of courtly language: ‘Court Poet must *create*, on *trifles* rant, / Make something out of nothing: Lord, I can’t!’ (*Remonstrance*, 2: 451-52). He argues that the association of sublimity with extravagance and an empty elevation of language is false: ‘I fear that too many a poet of the present day is affected (if I may coin an expression) with a *physi-phobia*, or a dread of nature and simplicity, and, if I may judge from the *difficulty* of comprehension of their meaning, they fancy Obscurity to be the genuine parent of the Sublime’.⁷⁷

It is in these terms of cultural propriety and rhetorical decorum that Wolcot associates the French disease with that of the elite at home (‘flattery’). This defence of literary decorum through the ridicule of false sublimity can be traced back to the tradition of Pope’s *Peri Bathous*, and also found in Gifford’s *The Maviad* in an attack on the Della Cruscan sublime.⁷⁸ However, whereas

⁷⁶ *The Remonstrance*, 2: 454.

⁷⁷ *Pindariana*, 4: 24-25. Wolcot’s friend Cyrus Redding reports that Wolcot once ridiculed the radical painter Henry Fuseli: ‘He had an idea,’ said Wolcot, ‘that eccentricity and sublimity were synonymous’. ‘Fuseli had a notion that sublimity consisted in strangeness’. Later, Wolcot said to Redding that ‘[Fuseli] never forgave me my attacks upon his monsters’. Redding, *Past Celebrities Whom I Have Known*, (London, 1866), 1: 262.

⁷⁸ Gifford, *The Maviad* (London, 1795), 17.

Gifford's hostility to literary extravagance is exclusively reserved for the radical version that suggests potential subversion of hierarchy and transmission of cultural anarchy, Wolcot's is more indiscriminate, equally distant from the radical and loyalist counterparts. Gifford, according to Wolcot, is also guilty of rhetorical indecorum:

As for Mr. Gifford's rhimes, they will appear extraordinary to such readers (and they are not a few) as prefer bombast to sublimity. Bombast is the idol of the vulgar — To such, the Attic simplicity appears arrant insipidity — the vulgar eye is sooner fascinated by the stiff, staring cabbage-rose brocade of the Harlot, than the modest and snowy Robe of Innocence (3: 495).

This same rhetoric of female impropriety as well as vulgar sublimity is employed to assimilate the language of loyalism to that of Revolution. A further example is Wolcot's 'instructions' to the then-Poet Laureate Thomas Warton in 1787:

stick to Earth, and leave the lofty Sky;
No more of *ti-tum-tum*, and *ti-tum-ti*.
Thus should an *honest* Laureat write of Kings
No praise than for *imaginary* things:
I own I cannot make my stubborn Rhyme
Call every King a Character sublime.⁷⁹

Wolcot constantly justifies his comic ridicule with this reasoning. In this sense, his comic ridicule appears to be in line with conservative criticism of the 1790s, not least the work of the counter-revolutionary satirists I will consider in Chapter

⁷⁹ *Instructions to a Celebrated Laureat* (1787), in *Works*, 1: 497.

4, who employ comedy as empiricist critique of the 'imaginary'.

This attitude had been formed in early outputs of *The Lousiad*. The beginning of the second Canto (1787), for example, contains a literary manifesto: that the sublime does not dwell [[in abstract imagination 'on Pegasus's back' but in 'lunar trifles' of 'Flies, Grasshoppers, Grubs, Cobwebs, Cuckoo-spittle', the 'world of little' in which 'art' dwells (1: 219-20). In a sarcastic 'Ode on French Taste' written in the mid 1790s, Wolcot compares 'laughable' French sublimity to a 'meretricious, noisy Lass', a 'bouncing Giantess, with eyes of flame', who, 'Trick'd out in flaunting lace, and stiff brocade, / With cabbage-roses loaded, glaring, vast! / Such is the Frenchman's song-inspiring Maid; / The name of this bold Brobdnag, Bombast' (4: 184). Wolcot concludes that 'Sublimity's a sweet, majestic Fair; / So Ample in her form, and speech, and paces; / So elegant her manners and her air — A Juno dress'd by all the easy Graces' (ibid). He has remarked earlier that 'Flattery is a pert French Milliner', 'a jade / Cover'd with rogue, and flauntingly array'd: / Makes saucy loves to every Man she meets / and offers even her favours in the street'.⁸⁰ Mary Robinson, Wolcot's close friend and admirer, wrote *Modern Manners* (1793), a verse satire that criticises contemporary vogue for empty fashion.⁸¹ The poem is punctuated with a

⁸⁰ *Ode upon Ode* (1787), 2: 390. These metaphors of female manners with which Wolcot's critique of the sublime is laden invite readings from the perspective of gender questions, though the ambiguities may not be easily resolved, as this allegedly misogynistic language can be read as a conservative stricture similar to those of More and Polwhele.

⁸¹ For an exploration of Wolcot's influence on Robinson that contributes to the Romantic reaction by Coleridge in particular, see Benjamin Colbert, 'Petrio-Pindarics: John Wolcot and the Romantics', *European Romantic Review*, 16 (2005), 311-328.

panegyric to Wolcot: 'Facetious Pindar! son of whim and wit, / The Pride of Poetry, the scourge of Pitt!'.⁸² Suggestively styling herself 'Horace Juvenal', Robinson echoes Wolcot in her cultural critique of the cult of fashion that can corrupt female education.

Wolcot pits comic bathos against what he perceives as cultural excess or corruption of the false sublimity that plagues the culture of British establishment and French radicalism alike. In this sense, Wolcot performs the task of cultural critic through his understanding of humour. Wolcot's proposal of humour can be understood as a method for establishing a critical, or at least bathetic, distance, from both French radicalism and British loyalism. The language of bathos serves to clear a space for literary independence from the established political regime, and by this distance humour prevents political corruptions. Wolcot claims that publicising the King's private faults and follies is something that King George's sinecure courtiers fail to do. In his anecdote of another private foible of the King, when the King marvels at the apple-dumplings, Wolcot justifies the publication of this comic anecdote thus: 'What modern Courtier, pray, hath got the face / To say to majesty, "O King! / At such a time, in such a place, / You did a very foolish thing?" / What courtier, not a foe to his own glory, / Would publish of his King this simple story [of apple-dumplings]?' (1: 458). He argues that ridicule against a private society like the court is an act of benevolence, seeking to bring it into public view. He perceived the aggravation of courtly sycophancy in the 1790s in the Poet Laureate, Pye, and produced many satires on him throughout

⁸² Mary Robinson, *Modern Manner* (London, 1793), 12.

the 1790s. As Mary Robinson puts it in her own satire on Pye, the true Poet ‘disdain[s] . . . flatt’ring strain’:

Why does the Laureat pen forbear to shew
Your well-plac’d features—simpering in a row?
Waiting the nod familiar, or the joke
Which, to be laugh’d at—only needs be spoke?⁸³

Wolcot consistently argues that ridicule of a private society, such as the court, is the exercise of true poetry and well-meaning criticism, which sought to expose private failings to public scrutiny. One of his contemporary critics compares Wolcot to a court jester, in that the ‘whimsical strain of Pindar’s best poetry’ lies in Wolcot’s conviction that ‘the muses were accustomed to keep a *jester* in their court’.⁸⁴ Such understanding, though not particularly popular in Wolcot’s contemporary reception, offers us another perspective of viewing him as maintaining a subtler kind of good relationship with the monarch, one defined precisely by his free severity and candid ridicule.

Wolcot makes a number of bold claims in the 1790s, without detailed elaboration, that wit and humour are germane to the national wellbeing. In his attack on Burke’s loyalism in the 1790s, he advances a gleeful vision of an ‘advancing Golden Age’ characterised by the triad of ‘Truth, Wit and Humour’ (3: 37). Wolcot writes later in 1804 that ‘Had Britain an atom of wit, / And wish’d her lost health to regain; / She would kick out the mountebank P[itt], /

⁸³ *Morning Post* (1 Jan. 1798), 3. See also Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry and Spectatorship* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 174-75.

⁸⁴ *Pindarics*, 17.

And consult her old doctor again' (5: 159). The depiction of Pitt as a mountebank may suggest a rhetorical, if not ideological, solidarity with the popular radicals who, as we have seen in Chapter 2, represented the government elite as illusionists or conjurers. Yet a more historically plausible conjecture may be that 1804 is the year Pitt returned to Premiership, which may strike a frustrated Wolcot as political treachery. Wolcot earlier celebrated Pitt's departure from his first Premiership in *Out at Last!* (1801), which confidently asserts that his poetry 'prophes[ies] a Minister to *tumble*' (3: 487). Yet even a bold claim such as this would appear relatively modest in comparison to the 'atom of wit' that is believed to be able to 'kick out mountebank P[itt]' and 'regain the lost health of Britain'. Like Robinson's statement that 'facetious' Wolcot's 'wit and whim' is the 'scourge of Pitt', Wolcot's claims elevate humour to a central significance in politics. The juxtaposition of 'Truth, Wit and Humour' that defines a British 'Golden Age' goes further than the authors I consider in this study, who generally employ humour as an element that expresses their value systems. In Wolcot's poetics, 'wit' and 'humour' appear to be the element that conditions political outlook rather than something harnessed to another, predetermined ideological commitment.

Wolcot insists on the idea that humour is not at odds with patriotism when the King turns out to be indispensable material for his comedy, which in turn contributes to the practice of humour essential to maintaining the 'liberty' of the

nation.⁸⁵ The ‘liberty’ in question, as he reiterates in *Liberty’s Last Squeak* following his renunciation of royal satire, with its defence of the freedom of innocuous jokes, refers to freedom of speech.⁸⁶ Such rhetoric may recall the discourse of British exceptionalism founded on British diversity and tolerance of humour. Yet even if Wolcot implicitly alludes to this discourse (which is hardly verifiable given the characteristic lack of elaboration and detailed explanation of his assertions and statements), his emphasis seems to lie in the judgment that the theoretical marriage between British humour and British liberty was being divorced in reality. On the other hand, freedom of expression became a favourite line of argument for Pigott, who drew on the Whig constitutional discourse of ‘freedom of speech’ as the rights guaranteed by the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights to justify his otherwise scurrilous writings.⁸⁷ For Mee, Pigott’s case points to an ambiguous conflation of Whig discourse of liberty and radical theory of natural rights, and therefore problematises the radicalism of the 1790s itself.⁸⁸ In a similar light, Wolcot’s justification of his humour draws on the ambiguous discourse of ‘liberty’ (without explaining it in detail), which problematises

⁸⁵ A record of Wolcot’s private conversation with a loyalist vividly illustrates the self-interpretation of his patriotism: ‘An advocate for Pitt remarked, that though not married to one of the female sex, he was wedded to his country. “Yes,” said Wolcot, “there is not doubt of that, and a cursed bad match it was for his country.” “You are too bad,” was the reply, “you are a bad subject for so good a sovereign as George III.” The Doctor rejoined, “that may or may not be, but I can assure you George III has been an excellent subject for me!”’ See Cyrus Redding, *Past Celebrities*, 1: 252.

⁸⁶ See *Liberty’s Last Squeak* (1796), in *Works*, vol. 3. See also above for the discussion of this text in the context of Horatian satire.

⁸⁷ Charles Pigott, *Persecution: The Case of Charles Pigott* (London, 1793), 37-38.

⁸⁸ Mee, ‘A Bold and Freespoken Man’, 342-46.

constitutional language when the freedom of ‘humour’ is taken into account. John Taylor reports that Wolcot ‘reverenced the British constitution, and held its political head in due veneration; but that he felt justified sporting with the peculiarities of the private character of the monarch’.⁸⁹ Taylor is unclear on whether Wolcot’s understanding of ‘British constitution’ serves to justify his sport of amusement at the expense of the King, as the ‘but’ in the middle of the sentence seems to discourage the connection between the two. Yet it is clear that Wolcot is dedicated to a comedy substantiated by the ‘peculiarities of the private character’, and that Wolcot does not consider his ‘sport’ a contradiction to the ‘British constitution’. This question is indeterminable in Wolcot given the confident yet vague terseness of his claims, but Wolcot’s claim of the synonymy between liberty and humour sheds light on a way in which comic expression, construed as part of ‘freedom of speech’, is claimed to be protected by the British political system and simultaneously critical and potentially subversive of the very system that is believed to foster it.⁹⁰

Wolcot’s tendency to place humour ahead of any specific political agenda offers a different vantage point from other politically committed practices, and this ambiguity is precisely why it provokes indeterminable controversy in the

⁸⁹ John Taylor, *Records of My Life*, 1: 364.

⁹⁰ Rhetoric of absolving otherwise critical words on political institutions of sedition by casting them under the scope of the British constitution is, of course, a strategy of Thomas Erskine’s courtroom defence. Erskine’s gained ground in his eloquent defence at the trial of Paine in 1792 by arguing for Paine’s adherence (true or not) to the ‘doctrine of Englishmen’. The freedom of speech is this glorious spirit of the ‘Constitution’, on which the prosperity of the nation depends; by granting this right to English subjects, the nation benefits from and improves on it rather than is subverted by it. See, for example, Erskine, *The Trial of Thomas Paine* (London, 1792), 24.

years of political crisis. In his *Miscellany* (1796), D'Israeli reevaluates Wolcot's work more affirmatively than his castigation in 'On the Abuse of Satire': 'Far from applauding the subjects of Peter Pindar, we must admire a copiousness of imagery, and a facility of wit, which variegate his early productions with a constant variety. At their first appearance the critics received them with a stoical apathy. The personality of satire alone enabled them to escape the menaced oblivion'.⁹¹ Saliently, D'Israeli seeks to single out Wolcot's aesthetic value from the moral deplorability of the content. It points to another ambiguity: either D'Israeli tries to depoliticise Wolcot, or to bring his satire under critical discipline as his method of political control. As D'Israeli's argues, 'a Poet alone should decide on a Poem . . . but this must not be accepted as an incontrovertible maxim'. For him, it falls to the lot of 'Professors of Art' to decide a poem's meaning.⁹² If comic language for Wolcot is a method of political discipline over forms of excess, his satire's own excesses (perceived by the conservatives), then, are themselves subject to another project of literary discipline. Later, Leigh Hunt remarks of Wolcot: 'It is a pity that this pleasant reprobate had not a little more principle in his writings, for he has really a most original vein of humour, — such a mixture of simplicity, archness, and power of language . . . constitutes him a class by himself. He is the Fontaine of lampooners.'⁹³

⁹¹ Isaac D'Israeli, *Miscellanies: or, Literary Recreations* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), 29-30.

⁹² Ibid, 24.

⁹³ James Henry Leigh Hunt, *Feast of the Poets* (1812), in Michael Eberle-Sinatra and Robert Morrison (gen. ed.), *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 2: 323-24.

The affirmation by the conservative D'Israeli and the reservation of the radical Hunt towards an anti-establishment satirist like Wolcot demonstrate once again the confusing character of political humour. This is probably due to Wolcot's hyperbolic confidence in humour as a supreme virtue in itself that goes beyond any narrow political agenda. Nevertheless, Wolcot's insistence in humour as an empiricist and pragmatist critique of sublimity, extravagance or transgression was continued in the counter-revolutionary novels in their ridicule of radical impracticality, to which I shall turn in the next chapter. Perhaps as an ironic twist, the language of Wolcot's seemingly radical critique turned out to be in line with those who are more inclined to defend the establishment.

Chapter 4

Counter-Revolution and the Social Discipline of 'Common life' in the 'Anti-Jacobin' Novels

I have read Burke's polemics in terms of the clash between ways of communal life in addition to that between political systems. Of course, fear about the regime change or the removal of constitutional monarchy still conditioned much of the political turbulence of the 1790s on the conservative or loyalist side. At the end of the 1790s, the immediate domestic threat of insurrection seems to have relatively subsided with the imposition of the Two Acts and the dissolution of some major reform societies, although foreign threats continued to mount with the rise of Napoleon and the renewed popular turbulence in the Rebellion of Ireland. Burke had identified the deeper threat of radicalism, which is to change the entire cultural character of the British nation, indeed the whole ideological structure of British way of being, by the 'revolution in manner' and the 'metaphysical' approach to 'common life'. The *Anti-Jacobin* magazine turned loyalist attention to the cultural and intellectual subversions (the 'new morality') to tackle threats in the cultural and literary forms in addition to that of the political insurrection.

Burke's 'common life' in *Reflections* is largely theoretical. If it takes concrete dramatisation in the comic form to construct the rhetoric of conservative dissuasion from the pursuit of 'abstract' theory, then a fictional narrative can be

an effective literary form. This chapter reads some key texts of the ‘Anti-Jacobin Novel’ to explore the ways in which humour was employed as an elaborate method of social discipline and of defining or constructing the ambit and remit of the political zone of engagement. Scholars have been well aware of the pervasive modes of humorous expression with which one is able to parody or ridicule, particularly to discredit the ‘new philosophy’ associated with the work of William Godwin and the ‘Jacobin’ novel, which is associated with various radicalisms and the ominous dissemination of the French Revolution and its principles across the Channel.¹

This chapter cannot avoid being selective of its material, since it focuses on the comic works among the anti-Jacobin novels. Those identified by scholarship as ‘anti-Jacobin’ novels vary in their literary expression to discredit radicalism, employing techniques including religious allegory, epistolary fiction, historical fiction, mock romance, and tragedy. I choose to focus on the comic works because the comic expression, which I will examine in the anti-Jacobin novels, offers us a perspective into the conception of social relation and ethical outlook, which informs the disciplining function germane to the broad conservative agenda. I argue that the comic expression is not simply employed to ridicule and write off radicalism, but to articulate ideological commitments at work in counter-revolution. In the counter-revolutionary novels that started in the late 1790s, the comedy of manner was put into practice in the hope of *reforming* and

¹ See, for example, Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), ch. 4.

reintroducing ludicrous individuals into the endangered enclave of ‘common life’. But while Burke confronts the urban crowd in defence of common life, the novels situate common life predominantly in rural England, which distances itself from urban turbulence. This indicates another significance of the form of literary fiction in counter-revolution. Comic fiction is consumed in domestic reading and not exposed to collective spectatorship of comedy in the form of theatre. I will discuss the conservative anxiety about the crowd revealed in the narrative form and content of the novels and their different ways to cope with it.

4.1 Comedy, the Decorum of the Novel, and Social Discipline

Isaac D’Israeli’s declaration in his anti-Jacobin novel *Vaurien* (1797), that ‘I have chosen the *form* rather than the *matter* of the novel’, is often read as his scepticism of the novel genre.² Marvin Spevack calls *Vaurien* ‘the pamphlet as novel’, which seems to suggest that it sits ambiguously or even uncomfortably between ‘political’ and ‘literary’ writing, and argues that D’Israeli ‘is not so much concerned with novel writing as he is with fiction and truth.’³ Yet the interactions between ‘form’ and ‘matter’ in this novel merit further investigation. D’Israeli’s criticism of the genre, as he makes clear in his Preface, dwells not on

² Isaac D’Israeli, *Vaurien, or Sketches of the Time* (1797), ed. Nicola Trott (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), 8.

³ Marvin Spevack, *Curiosities Revisited: The Works of Isaac D’Israeli* (Hildesheim: Olms 2007), 157, 160. Spevack asserts that ‘D’Israeli is not so much concerned with novel writing as he is with fiction and truth: ‘The eye may be deceived, truth may be delusion: this is the philosophical context into which *Vaurien* is introduced’ (160).

its innate flaws, but the present ‘dangerous class of men to unite politics with metaphysics’ in novel writing (presumably, therefore, a castigation directed at the ‘Jacobin novelists’), and the contemporary vogue for the ‘marvellous’ as the ‘matter’ of the novel.⁴ For D’Israeli, the ‘marvelous’ in writing shows that it is ‘much easier to excite our wonder, than to satisfy our judgment’.⁵ *Vaurien* tells a story of ‘constitutionally virtuous’ Charles Hamilton, son of a country clergyman, who travels to London and is fascinated by the urban clamour and chaos and seduced by its radicalism. The peaceful and ordered rural setting of Charles’s origin featuring characters of ‘hobbyhorsical’ dispositions in the opening chapter quickly gives way to the tumult of London from chapter two on and is never recuperated. D’Israeli offers a further reflection in a chapter entitled ‘A Dissertation on the Marvellous in Novel Writing’, which introduces the eponymous villain Vaurien, the French Revolutionary, Charles’s main philosophical seducer, and the incarnation of the ‘marvellous’. Vaurien, who leads Charles almost to personal ruin, is eventually deported from England, in a reference to the Alien Act of 1795.⁶ Vaurien as an incarnation of the ‘marvelous’ seems to serve as an intruder into the well-being of English social life that must be expelled. Simultaneously, this character reflects all of the potential dangers found within London in particular and England in general: the novel features a

⁴ D’Israeli, *Vaurien*, 77.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For this point of the banishment of foreign revolutionary threat from England as an allegory of the Alien Act, see Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 163-67.

London that is already chaotic, as well as a radical society with members such as the Godwinian philosopher Mr. Subtile, the radical orator Mr. Rant, the radical publisher Mr. Libel, and Lord Belfield, Charles's patron who capitulates to radicalism. All of these figures might evolve into monsters like Vaurien and subvert the fabric of British national life. The novel alternates comedy with pathos and satire: while the narrative admonishes the urban chaos evolving into total subversion catalysed by the Vaurien the French schemer, it is punctuated with comic parodies of the ineffective gang of these radical 'philosophers' who are preoccupied with empty talk without being able to carry out their subversive agendas. It seems that the comedy in *Vaurien* is involved in the conflict among ideological and formal forces, in which it battles for supremacy to control the alarming aspects of the novel. Although the novel's matter is saturated with the 'marvellous', the comic techniques employed to deflate the 'marvellous' can be viewed as an effort to clean up the mess of the generic corruption of the novel.

D'Israeli's claim of a merely strategic usage of the medium of the novel exemplified the anxiety shared by many counter-revolutionary authors about the subversive potential of romance and sentimentalism as the popular 'matter' of the novel, leading some scholars to understand the anti-Jacobin novel as anti-novel.⁷ Recently, Morgan Rooney has pointed out that in works such as

⁷ See for example M. O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 1; Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution* 16, 158; W. M. Verhoeven, "General Introduction", *The Anti-Jacobin Novels*, ed. W. M. Verhoeven, vol.1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), li; and Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline: Women, Conservatism, and the Novel after the French Revolution* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003), 14.

Robert Bisset's *Douglas* (1800) and D'Israeli's *Vaurien* the genre of the novel is not discredited. Rather, it is reappraised in the hope of reclaiming its authentic tradition; such works do not protest against the novel as such, but rather against its indecorous generic variations. The model for D'Israeli and Bisset, Rooney shows, was the novels of Cervantes, Le Sage, and especially Henry Fielding, who claimed to present the experience of 'life' and 'human nature' 'as it is', the category of the concrete, factual, present, and mundane. If so, the anti-Jacobin novel can be viewed as an effort to (re-)establish a paradigm of what Ian Watt's classic, though disputed, thesis has conceived of the eighteenth-century novel as an empiricist valorisation of concrete worldly experience.⁸ Rooney aptly suggests that this anti-Jacobin novelistic discourse anticipated the paradigm of the realist novel of the nineteenth century.⁹ This discourse, however, was not without precedent. In his review of *Peregrine Pickle* in the *Monthly Review*, John Cleland distinguishes Smollett's comic novel from 'that flood of novels, tales, romances, and other monsters of the imagination, which have been either wretchedly translated, or even more unhappily imitated, from the *French*, whose literary levity we have not been ashamed to adopt, and encourage the propagation of so depraved a taste.'¹⁰ For Cleland, the comic novels by Smollett

⁸ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).

⁹ See Morgan Rooney, 'Anti-Jacobin Fiction and the Eighteenth-Century Traditions of the Novel: Robert Bisset, Isaac D'Israeli, and the Novel's Reclamation', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 48 (2015), 221-238.

¹⁰ [John Cleland], *The Monthly Review*, 4 (Mar. 1751), 355; reprinted in Lionel Kelly (ed.), *Tobias Smollett: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York; Routledge, 1987), 44.

and Fielding provide an antidote to the 'French' fashion. The novel must base itself on the lived experience of 'common life':

as the matter of [Smollett and Fielding's novels] is chiefly taken from nature, from adventures, real or imaginary, but familiar, practical, and probable to be met with in the course of common life, they may serve as pilot's charts, or maps of those parts of the world, which every one may chance to travel through; and in this light they are public benefits. Whereas romances and novels which turn upon characters out of nature, monsters of perfection, feats of chivalry, fairy-enchantments, and the whole train of the marvellous-absurd, transport the reader unprofitably into the clouds, where he is sure to find no solid footing, or into those wilds of fancy, which go for ever out of the way of all human paths.¹¹

Cleland's view recalls the critical paradigm that opposes British empiricism to French fancy, in this case manifest in the novel. The contrast between the British emphasis on 'common life' and the French emphasis on the marvelous was continued in the conservative writings of the 1790s to register their critique of the Revolutionary ideology. Furthermore, while Cleland did not explicitly associate the *comic* novel with the literary ethics of empirical propriety, many counter-revolutionary novels use this literary medium to enforce disciplinary projects through the comic critiques of human nature. Certainly, not all conservative novels of this kind employ comic modes of expression to articulate their criticism, yet comedy's theme of human fallibility is nonetheless commonly

¹¹ [Cleland], *The Monthly Review*, 4 (Mar. 1751), 356; reprinted in Kelly, 45.

employed to support their case against the radical, Godwinian argument of human perfectibility.¹² D’Israeli and Bisset joined others such as Jane West who claimed to have purged ‘splendour of language . . . of the marvelous, or the enigmatical’, ‘sudden elevation, or astonishing depression. [The novel] merely spoke of human life as it is’.¹³ West’s claim not only attacks the vogues of the novel such as romance and the Gothic, but also contributes to the construction of decorum for the novel as a shift to ‘human life as it is’. These generic declarations may serve as a riposte to Godwin’s project. Of course, Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* claims to depict ‘things as they are’, as do other ‘Jacobins’, yet this subject matter in Godwin’s novel functions as an example of the *status quo* subject to reformist critique. Godwin stated in the preface to his *St. Leon* (1799) that, having seen novelists delineate the scenes of ‘real life’, he ‘endeavoured to gain footing in the neglected track of the . . . province’ of the ‘imagined new’.¹⁴ Whereas ‘real life’ is a cause of discontent for some radicals, it is a solid ground of lived experience for the counter-revolutionaries. In Elizabeth Hamilton’s

¹² The insistence on human flaws certainly informs counter-revolutionary case against democracy as well. Bisset, for example, was a staunch Burkean, who made numerous fierce attacks on the Revolution, but his polemic is not restricted to revolutionary principle but targeted at ‘democracy’ as such. One pamphlet in particular surveys the long history of ‘democracy’ and argues that human nature always fails political projects of universal enfranchisement of the many, whose nature cannot be controlled. This is a possible explanation of Bisset’s recourse to Fielding as a model of human understanding in which weaknesses and comic foibles are to be acknowledged rather than transcended. Robert Bisset, *Sketch of Democracy* (London: J. Mathews [etc.], 1796).

¹³ Jane West, *A Gossip’s Story, And a Legendary Tale* (London: T.N. Longman, 1796), 1: vi.

¹⁴ William Godwin, *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Pamela Clemit, in Mark Philp (gen. ed.), *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992), 10.

Memoirs of Modern Philosophers (1800), the much caricatured ‘Bridgetina Botherim’ (a character allegedly modelled on the radical philosopher Mary Hays) confesses that her metaphysical mind has difficulty ‘descend[ing] to the vulgar concerns of common life’.¹⁵ In Hamilton’s novel, ‘common life’ is a realm not only of practical domestic concern but also of social duty and of the basis of community. The novel parallels the stories of three protagonists — the ‘modern philosopher’ Bridgetina Botherim, Julia Delmond, and Harriet Orwell — who take different approaches to the practical concerns of ‘common life’. In Hamilton’s didactic narrative, only Harriet Orwell, adhering consistently to practical wisdom and social duty even when it is necessary to resist her personal desire and passion and decline a marriage proposal before the time is ripe, has her virtue finally rewarded at the end of the novel with the marriage she longs for. Julia’s gullibility to the seduction of new philosophy and her abandonment of her father is eventually punished with death. The Godwinian Bridgetina, on the other hand, longs in vain to abandon civilisation and travel to join the Hottentots. Her wish to transcend mundane business is mocked throughout and finally chastised. ‘Common life’ as the ambit of legitimate concern for the conservatives is here being established.

These attempts at the establishment of the orthodoxy of the novel as a mimetic genre, in which ‘common life’ is approved as its legitimate matter, is mediated in the evocation of the comic tradition, from Cervantes to Fielding. As

¹⁵ Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), ed. Claire Grogan (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), 318.

a matter of fact, the ‘Jacobin’ novelists such as Robert Bage and Thomas Holcroft are also highly enthusiastic about the comic literature of Fielding and Smollett.¹⁶ In his private life, Godwin was far more liberal-minded than his reputation would suggest, as his circle of acquaintances and reading sweep across the political spectrum, including even his ideological opponents, and appears affirmative of the work of Sterne, Fielding, and other comic canons.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the representative strategy in which Godwinians are portrayed as if they are humourless transcendentalists serves to legitimise certain ideological content that associates the ‘matter’ of the novel with comedy in the anti-Jacobin moral enterprise. In understanding D’Israeli’s claim that he chose ‘the form rather than the matter’ of the novel, therefore, it is important to take into account the rhetorical (the comic) as well as generic (the novel) form as the mediator of the ideological content (‘common life’, ‘human nature’, and so forth) that the anti-Jacobin moralists wish to inculcate.

M. O. Grenby’s study understands the anti-Jacobin novel as a cultural and ideological ‘hegemony’, which creates certain discursive terrains in which related issues are put on the agenda and which enables the novelists to be generalised as ‘a single text’ by ‘an aggregate author’.¹⁸ My elaboration of a formal paradigm here can shed some light on the formation of such a ‘hegemony’, and address the scholarly dispute over the ‘anti-Jacobin novel’ as a

¹⁶ See also *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 7.

¹⁷ For his affirmation of Fielding and Sterne, see Godwin, *Letters of William Godwin*, ed. Pamela Clemit, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010-14), 1: 121-22, 123, 124.

¹⁸ M. O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 170.

coherent enterprise. Though alternative terms such as the ‘anti-Jacobin’ novel are useful in describing a broader concern about the threat of revolution in its various forms, a commonly expressed scepticism about the binary categorization of ‘anti-Jacobin’ against ‘Jacobin’ novels is that such arbitrary nomenclature appropriated from the French context barely covers the wide spectrum of opinions on the Revolution, even obscuring the differences within each category.¹⁹ This concern of historical rigour is understandable, and it is true that the name is generalised from a handful of self-styled ‘Anti-Jacobins’ and the namesake conservative magazine founded in 1798 by George Canning and his conservative coterie. Nevertheless, ‘Jacobinism’, for one thing, was increasingly used and abused to nominate a diversity of potentially subversive discourses, activities and tendencies, rather than those who directly expressed their sympathy with the French revolutionary incarnation. At any rate, the idea of ‘hegemony’ is useful in establishing the common ground shared by works of Isaac D’Israeli, Jane West, Elisabeth Hamilton, Robert Bisset, and George Walker. Despite the diversity of opinions on particular issues of these writers, they shared the view that political conversation can only be conducted in the categories already

¹⁹ See for example Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. xxi–xxiii. Also, Miriam Wallace argues against this ‘misnomer’, owing to what they consider as a misleading reduction to a monolithic school of the novel. Wallace in particular proposes instead a ‘continuum’ that includes both the ‘Jacobin’ and ‘anti-Jacobin’ novels, whose contradictions and disagreements do not obscure their overlapped views and common grounds. Wallace, ‘Crossing from Jacobin to “Anti-Jacobin”’: Rethinking the Terms of English Jacobinism’, in Jeffrey Cass and Larry Peer (eds.), *Romantic Border Crossings* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2008), 99–112, and Wallace, *Revolutionary Subjects in the English “Jacobin” Novel, 1790–1805* (Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 2009).

available, not least ‘common life’.

This commonality may go some way towards understanding the complexity of their relationship to Edmund Burke. Indeed, Burke’s subtlety, as well as his ambivalent utilitarianism, discourages commentators from too closely aligning him with contemporary loyalists, yet I want nevertheless to accentuate the common ground Burke and the novels in question share in putting forward their conservative cases.²⁰ Consider this objective stated in George Walker’s often comic anti-Jacobin novel *The Vagabond*: ‘The following work is written with a desire of placing, in a *practical* light, some of the prominent absurdities of many self-important reformers of mankind, who, having heated their imaginations, sit down to write *political romances*, which never were, and never will be practical; but which, coming into the hands of persons as little acquainted with human nature, the history of mankind, and the proofs of religious authenticity, as themselves, hurry away the mind from common life into dreams of ideal felicity . . .’.²¹ The evocation of ‘common life’ recalls again Burke’s dictum in

²⁰ Marilyn Butler argues that the anti-Jacobins are clearly un-Burkean, in that their criticism of sentimentalism is irreconcilably at odds with Burke’s sentimental style. But such judgement may have oversimplified ‘sentimentalism’ as unequivocally self-indulgent passion, when in Burke’s *Reflections* the function of ‘natural’, ‘untaught feeling’ or ‘inbred sentiment’ is to teach popular *submission* to political authority rather than to encourage egotism. Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 94-95. For Burke’s isolated status in mainstream conservatism at least in the early receptions of *Reflections*, see F. P. Lock, *Burke’s Reflections* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 132-65. For a reserved attitude in associating Burke with other conservatives owing to the different attitudes towards popular propaganda through print, see Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution*, 7-9.

²¹ Walker, ‘Preface’, *The Vagabond: A Novel*, ed. W. M. Verhoeven (Peterborough, Ont.; Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2004), 54. All quotes from the text are from this edition.

Reflections on the ‘metaphysical’ assault on common life by ‘self-important reformers of mankind’. In echoing D’Israeli, Bisset, and West, Walker succinctly casts the political infelicities in terms of the degeneration of generic decorum, in which ‘political romance’ eclipses realist depictions of ‘common life’.

The presence of the comic form provides a key to understanding the anti-Jacobin novels as elaborate fictional footnotes to Burke’s metaphor of abstract theory facing refraction through the ‘dense medium’ of ‘common life’, despite the fact that Burke’s own style was far from comic. We have seen that an eighteenth-century critical consensus established ‘common life’ as the legitimate subject matter of comedy. To recapitulate: comedy’s exposure of human foibles, failures, and finitude and the irrelevance of transcendence finds its province in ‘common life’, which materialises the ordinary and the mundane of ‘men’ and ‘manners’ in scenes of everyday intercourse. This tradition was used to refute the transcendental hypothesis of ‘perfectibility’ of new philosophy and shift the terrain of communication into an empirically verifiable category as the proper ‘matter’ of a literary form. The comic form in the anti-Jacobin novels therefore registers a significant aspect of what David Simpson identified as British ‘revolt against theory’ in its implacable privileging of *praxis* and experience over metaphysics.²² Marilyn Butler’s early study on the subject has pointed out in passing the prevalence of the Quixotic motif in which the anti-hero in the novels ‘travels the country, meeting grotesque groups of troublemakers, and eventually learning to see society as it is’ and ‘learns to take his place in the world as it

²² David Simpson, *Revolt against Theory*. See also Chapter 2, p. 77, n.3.

actually is'.²³ Yet the last part of the quote suggests that the anti-hero in an anti-Jacobin novel can only be partially Quixotic; the unbending pride and persistent delusion of the Knight of La Mancha in Cervantes's novel do not persist but are reformed in the anti-Jacobin settings. The tension between Quixotism and its practical context must to a certain extent be resolved in anti-Jacobin fiction.

Because the 'dense medium of common life' was at stake in a revolutionary age that threatened to politicise everything, anti-Jacobin comedy played a vital role in counter-revolutionary literature in charting out a largely depoliticised enclave in the form of the novel. As Kevin Gilmartin understands the enterprise of the anti-Jacobin novel, an enclave was situated in the serener rural community, where 'domestic interiors offered a refuge from corrupt public life, and an emblem of everything that revolutionary desire put at risk'. As Gilmartin puts it, 'The anti-Jacobin novel can seem by turns a curiously disengaged fictional enterprise *or* the most vexed and compelling of counter-revolutionary forms of expression. Disengaged, because by comparison with periodical and pamphlet literature the novel did not address popular radical protest in a sustained way, nor was it significantly integrated with counter-revolutionary organization'.²⁴ The 'or' can be changed to the more paradoxical 'and'. The fictional enterprise can be viewed as an imaginative effort to resuscitate the conservative category of common life—the category that extends or displaces politics to individual

²³ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 107.

²⁴ Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution*, 16, 150 (my italics).

manner, everyday social intercourse, domestic economy—the principal content to which anti-Jacobin novelists avow to attend. In this sense, the category of common life is restricted to a very particular community, such as the rural, domestic social circle away from the urban turbulence, rather than a general signifier for all quotidian lived experience. Domestic scenes, in which most anti-Jacobin narrative takes place, are in this regard a literary and cultural resistance to the alleged degeneration of the public sphere of print, tavern, theatre, debating society, government, and the outdoor crowd that suggests an insurrectionary threat. As Gilmartin puts it, ‘the novel is distinctive within the field of counter-revolutionary literature for its detailed rendering of domestic conversation as a way of securing commitment to government and social order A conceptual split between public and private realms is symptomatically reinforced even as it is challenged. Yet despite these limits, fictional episodes of domestic conversation about the forces of revolution do represent a concerted effort to meet the force of subversion through the development of collective habits of criticism, reflection, and deliberation’.²⁵ Gilmartin observes that the new ‘politics of home’, predicated on the primacy of small community and common life, is a major contribution to the anti-Jacobin novel’s redeployments of politics, at once extensively politicking and symptomatically depoliticising. To illustrate his point, Gilmartin draws on Habermas’s observation of the private sphere of the conjugal family as the

²⁵ Ibid, 175.

‘training ground’ for the development of public political sphere.²⁶ I would add that this ideological development manifest in the anti-Jacobin novels is also in a sense foreshadowed by the eighteenth-century reflection (although from an aristocratic and elite perspective rather than the popular or middle-class one from the anti-Jacobin novelists) by Shaftesbury and Corbyn Morris on country retirement as a cultivation of private virtue, from which public virtue or political wisdom benefits.²⁷

Gilmartin’s otherwise cogent judgement, however, should not downplay another important mode of communication in addition to ‘conversation . . . of criticism, reflection, and deliberation’. An alternative appraisal to this implicit *category mistake* will be to look temporarily beyond the conspicuous artistic limitations of the anti-Jacobin novel and its frequent failure to recognise radical diversity, paying attention instead to the *dramatisations* of the revolution ‘debate’, which, in my view, registers their principal argument. It is well known that much of the power of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and

²⁶ Ibid. For Habermas, see *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), 29, 43–51.

²⁷ See also Chapter 1. This paradox can also be explicated by John Barrell’s reflections on the representation of rural life and ‘cottage politics’ in the 1790s. By representing rural life as private, timeless and unchanging, in contrast to political turbulence and rapid social change in urban life, this depoliticising effort effectively contributes to the politicisation as an endeavour to circumscribe the private realm from the public one. John Barrell, ‘Cottage Politics’, in his *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasion of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 210–246. For a further elaboration on this theme in the creation of rusticity in the urban context in the 1790s, see Barrell, ‘Rus in Urbe’, in Philip Connell and Nigel Leask (eds), *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 109–27.

subsequent writings of the late Burke lie in their balance of rational analysis and affective appeal, in calm reflections punctuated by sentimental vignettes. Since it is important to read the novel as much as a literary form as a medium for the conveyance of ideas, style as well as substance should be assessed if these novels are to be awarded the epithet of 'Burkean'. It must be acknowledged again, that Burke's argument lies not only in what he says but in how he says it. The emphasis of lived experience, untaught feeling, and common life in Burke's writing are expressed less in constative arguments than in performative allegories and symbolisms attempting to move the heart and sentiment. In my view, this is what the novels often dwell on—an attempt of dissuasion from the seduction, not by 'conversation . . . of criticism, reflection, and deliberation', but by the immediate and infallible impact of experience, action, feeling, and 'common sense' that do without speech and ideation.²⁸ To give a very straightforward example, the new philosopher Bridgetina Botherim throughout *Memoirs* is never *talked* out of new philosophy, never successfully persuaded by exemplary figures such as Harriet Orwell, Dr. Orwell, or Mrs. Fielding, who offer rational argumentations against her sophism. She is only chastened and reformed after she *experiences* the impracticality of her philosophy, and in particular after she

²⁸ On the anti-Jacobin novel as a world of 'common sense', see April London, 'History, Romance and the Anti-Jacobins' "Common Sense"', in her *Women and Property in the Eighteenth-century English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). It is necessary to note that the idea of 'common sense' was by no means a counter-revolutionary monopoly, as radicals like Thomas Paine also privileged it as a companion category of reason and unabashedly used it to characterise their own writings. I then only become semantically specific when relating to the other conservative categories just mentioned in the main text.

sees the suffering of the repentant Julia at her deathbed. This moment is when her loquaciousness comes to an absolute end: she does not even (need to) express her repentance or recount her education in words but simply weeps ‘bitterly’ in response to Julia’s end. As one character realises, ‘an incident so striking was more likely to produce an effect on the mind of Bridgetina than any argument that could possibly be made use of’.²⁹ Bridgetina never speaks up again in the novel. Hamilton’s ‘persuasion’ is thus silently achieved. The philosopher Fredrick Fenton in George Walker’s *Vagabond*, which I will discuss in more details later, also learns the infallibility of experience rather than ‘philosophy’ not by verbal debate but by suffering hunger and the cannibalism of the primitives in his quixotic adventure.

It would seem counterintuitive, then, to emphasise feeling as a mediator of humour, since the former relies presumably on pathos and the latter is usually expressed through the language of bathos. This apparent contradiction can be resolved when both are understood as forms of passion, and both can be categorised as indispensable byways towards rational argument in anti-Jacobin satire. Although the decisive persuasion occurs in the emotive impact at the end of the novel, it is the recurrent comic deflations to Bridgetina’s quixotic quest that pave the way towards her education. One scene finds her lost in a narcissistic sentimentalism that leaves her companion, Julia, unable to refrain from laughing at a figure of whose every feature ‘screwed into formality, and every distorted limb sprawling in affected agitation . . . presented such an apparent antidote to

²⁹ Hamilton, *Memoirs*, 364, 366.

the tender passion, that the mention of love from her lips had in it something irresistibly ridiculous'. Modifiers such as 'irresistibly' suggest the drive to laughter is also a type of powerful feeling that rational composure cannot command: 'It was with some difficulty that Julia could sufficiently command her voice to desire her to proceed'. Bridgetina's ludicrousness predetermines Julia's judgement before she can recompose herself for further conversation.³⁰ Hamilton outrageously characterises Bridgetina as egocentric, affectedly sentimental, and hardly conversable, whose solipsistic oratories are constantly interrupted rather than disputed. In an oft-quoted passage, Walker claims that 'perhaps the *Novel* may gain attention, when arguments of the soundest sense and most perfect eloquence shall fail to arrest the feet of the *Trifler* from the specious paths of the new Philosophy. It is also an attempt to parry the Enemy their own weapons; for no channel is deemed improper by them, which can introduce their sentiments'.³¹ Subsequently, the rhetoric of caricature in *Vagabond* to replace 'arguments of the soundest sense' provokes *Analytical Review* to 'protest against the idea of ridicule being a test of truth'.³² The *Analytical Review* holds that humorous language is not as well-disposed as reason or religion to the claim to 'truth', whereas the anti-Jacobin novelists affirmed its efficacy in advancing their counter-revolutionary cases in addition to rational argument. There is a comic episode in *The Vagabond* where Stupeo and his surgeon 'debate' the idea of the 'incomprehensibility' of motion. Stupeo

³⁰ Ibid, 174.

³¹ Walker, *Vagabond*, 53.

³² *Analytical Review*, New Series, 1 (February 1799), 212, quoted in Walker, *Vagabond*, 374.

explains why motion is ‘incomprehensible’ in an extravagantly jargon-laden language, only to be rebutted by the surgeon: ‘My dear Sir’, cried he, ‘I can form no clear idea of your *incomprehensible* discourse’.³³ In avoiding losing himself within Stupeo’s philosophical maundering, the surgeon’s comic response activates an alternative faculty of intuition or common sense that can facilitate the communication between the author and his reader.³⁴

The comic mode of expression is therefore not a contingent rhetorical device but a specific form of (political) communication willfully chosen by the novelists to address the matters of common life. In her epigraph to *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Hamilton quotes from Horace’s Satire that ‘Ridicule shall frequently prevail, / And cut the knot, when graver reasons fail’.³⁵ Meanwhile, her preface quotes from Akenside’s *Pleasures of the Imagination* to justify the use of humour to ‘aid the tardy steps of Reason’.³⁶ Hamilton proceeds to open the novel with a slightly abrupt ‘The pudding is very good’, as the strange *in medias res* of the *sixth* chapter. This cue-less opening sentence that cuts in a

³³ Walker, *Vagabond*, 175.

³⁴ This role of humorous expression was recognised in a review of Isaac D’Israeli’s anti-Jacobin novel *Vaurien* in the *Analytical Review* (1798): ‘The power of ridicule to shake the gravest system of philosophy, and derogate from it’s [*sic*] dignity and importance, has been very frequently acknowledged; an odd fantastic simile, or a ludicrous idea conveyed in some pithy pungent phraseology, is more often successful in discrediting an hypothesis, than the most laborious and argumentative disquisition’. Isaac D’Israeli, *Vaurien*, 8. This remark affirms the eighteenth-century idea of ridicule as a test of truth and as a byway of reason, but it dwells chiefly on the satiric function of political humour.

³⁵ Hamilton, *Memoirs*, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 36.

hiatus of five missing chapters abruptly positions the reader within the setting. Hamilton reports that the missing manuscripts were burnt by her maid, yet she seems to have little intention to recover or rewrite them: 'The first fifty pages having been torn off to kindle the morning fires, made a mighty chasm in the work; but the remaining fragment appeared to me so worthy of being laid before the publick, that I quickly conceived the design of becoming its editor'.³⁷ The literary effect, however, of this seeming accident is not insignificant. The reader would have no problem following the narrative, as a familiar scene of teatime domestic conversation, or a scene of rural common life, unfolds smoothly from this sentence onwards, as if the reader's consciousness seamlessly connects to the familiar semantic environment. The good-natured compliment for the pudding comes from a house guest at the Botherims, who goes on to assume that it was the work of his 'cousin Biddy' (Bridgetina). 'Cousin Biddy' immediately insists in indignation and characteristic pretension in being called Bridgetina, and protests in reddening anger that pudding-making is below her philosophical dignity: 'I do assure you, sir, you are very much mistaken, if you think that I employ my time in such a manner'. The caricaturist portrayal of the ill-conversable, smug, and sullen character of Bridgetina that plays the killjoy in social scenes draws conspicuously on the well-worn comic formula. Nevertheless, the point is the efficacy of such formula in quickly establishing the consensus of a shared (though middle-class) horizon of lived experience that affirms a community and simultaneously singles out the character as its

³⁷ Ibid, 35.

unsympathisable nuisance. This formula in general fits into that of Bergson's comic character whose persistent singularity fails to respond to the flux of social life. An episode in *Memoirs* sees Bridgetina Botherim take up a book presumably rich in humour and skim it in silence, while refusing, as a mark of her unsociability, to read aloud to her companion, Julia. She then surprises Julia by dismissing works of Cervantes, Moliere, and Fielding, and declares indiscriminately: 'I do not care for wit and humour . . . they may serve to amuse the vulgar, but you know they are quite exploded by the new philosophy. . . . The investigators of mind never condescend to make their readers laugh'. Bridgetina loses an indispensable horizon of communication in her metaphysical stoicism: as Julia rejoins, 'The authors most remarkable for wit and humour appear to have had no slight knowledge, of the human heart. Do you think that Cervantes, or Moliere, or Fielding, were strangers to the study of the mind; or that they could possibly have delineated the minute features of the soul in the manner they have done, without an intimate acquaintance with its nature?' Patently, in evoking the comic literary canon that brings Hamilton in line with D'Israeli and Bisset, the ways in which the ideas of wit and humour are pitted against new philosophy is by no means limited to bathetic rejection. Rather, they include a positive construct of a community based on shared cultural heritage. Julia and Bridgetina come to agree that the difference among readers in their relish for humour results from attachment to different societies that nourish 'philosophy' and affective ties respectively.³⁸

³⁸ Ibid, 172, 173.

Hamilton's dramatisation of Bridgetina's pretensions against wit and humour at the expense of her sociability evokes the eighteenth-century discursive tradition. In this regard, the jocose language of the anti-Jacobin novels pursue more than the Hobbesian triumph achieved in ridiculing its political enemy; it was also disposed to valorise an essential method of sociability that hinges on the openness to raillery and ridicule. In other words, anti-Jacobin ridicule as a means of ascertaining satiric partisanship is at the same time supplemented if not tempered by its inherent ethics of comic sociability as a horizon of communication. While the humour in the novels does fulfil the satiric-political function of symbolically separating their ridiculous political opponents from the conservative community of common life, it simultaneously (and paradoxically) strives to reintroduce them into that community *if* they could accept the comicality of human nature and accordingly develop a sense of humour. In this regard, the use of human comedy in the anti-Jacobin novel is a vital method of moral education. Examples of the main faults of the 'Jacobin' character as lacking in wit and humour are ubiquitous. Much of Bridgetina's character is shared by the sentimental heroine, Marianne Dudley, in *A Gossip's Story*, whose faults includes an excess of passion. Her sister, Louisa, and her love interest, Mr. Pelham, both favour the remedy of laughter at her self-indulging 'enthusiasm', reminiscent of Shaftesbury's proposal of wit and humour as an antidote to similar diseases.³⁹ Both Fredrick Fenton in *The Vagabond* and the eponymous anti-hero in *St. Godwin* betray an inability to understand the comicality of their

³⁹ West, *A Gossip's Story* (1796), 53. 54.

own philosophical cant. The new philosopher, Mr. Cloudley, in *The Infernal Quixote* (1801) adheres so implacably to his humourless rationalism that he becomes an object of pranks. When the facetious Mr. Rattle observes that Cloudley shows sign of jealousy at Rattle's flirtation with Mrs. Cloudley, he 'can hardly refrain his laughter when he perceived the husband affecting a philosophical indifference'.⁴⁰ Likewise, Bridgetina Botherim's philosophical mentor, Mr. Myope, struggles ludicrously to maintain his metaphysical aloofness by blurting out inarticulate swearwords when a monkey bites his finger, refusing to relieve the clumsiness with self-mocking laughter.⁴¹ By and large, the anti-Jacobin comicality evidences an eighteenth-century comic grammar, which can be cast in terms of what Henri Bergson calls as 'a special lack of adaptability to society'. Through the revelation of the social ineptitude of the radical individuals, counter-revolutionary laughter functions like a corrective to the resistance to 'life' and a method to convert and reintroduce the radicals into the sociable world.⁴²

The possibility of comic conversation in addition to comic deflation and ridicule is evident in an episode in *Memoirs*. Late in the novel, Mrs. Botherim, Bridgetina's doting and illiterate mother, having started by this moment to regret Bridgetina's pampered affectation and unsociability, complains about her daughter bombarding her with the buzzword of the Godwinian notion of 'general

⁴⁰ Charles Lucas, *Infernal Quixote*, ed. M. O. Grenby (Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004), 218.

⁴¹ Hamilton, *Memoirs*, 48-49.

⁴² Bergson, 'Laughter', 146. See also Chapter 1, 48-49.

utility': 'who is this General Utility? . . . I never seed [*sic*] a General but General Villers, in all my life'. This risible blunder is not checked with ridicule by her interlocutor, Doctor Orwell, the paternalist mentor of the novel: 'General Utility, my dear Madam', he responds, carrying the topic on with comic wit, 'is an ideal personage, a sort of Will o' the wisp, whom some people go a great way out of the road to find, but still see him mining in some distant and unbeaten track; while, if they would keep at home and look for him in the plain path of christian [*sic*] duty, they would never miss their aim'.⁴³ The personification of Godwin's abstract notion that offers a comprehensible metaphor for the illiterate Mrs. Botherim is an example in which Hamilton fulfils her promise to use wit to facilitate communication when rationality may not be quite up to the task. However, this method of allegorical reification seems not to reject Godwin's notion but to reinterpret and transform it under a religious-conservative framework. This appropriation exemplifies the counter-revolutionary speech-act with which one relocates the quest for virtue from 'some distant and unbeaten track' to 'home' and 'plain path of christain duty'. As I have tried to suggested, more than simply a rhetorical instrument for discrediting radical philosophy, the comic ridicule in the counter-revolutionary novel can be understood as a vital factor of the conservative imagination of social discipline. The anti-Jacobin novels of D'Israeli, Walker, Hamilton, Charles Lucas, among others, share the Burkean view that moral education is most effective in felt experience; the methods, however, register their significant difference. While Burke's moral

⁴³ Hamilton, *Memoirs*, 345.

education hinges on the disciplining of the public sphere, that is, of the crowd through the form of tragic theatre, the novelists shift attention to the private home and community where lighter, comic scenes take place.⁴⁴ I want to show in the next section that the comic form is where practicality in common life is brought to the forefront of the political question; it serves as a vital methodology of organising social relation in smaller communities and of scaling down the revolutionary threat to a manageable size.

4.2 Community, the ‘Humourist’ and the Comic Dispersal of the Multitude

Readers of the anti-Jacobin novels may notice the uneven targeting of the ‘Jacobin’ radicals as well as the uneven representative strategies of different types. When it comes to parody, first of all, it was the radical culture of the intellectual elite — exemplified through the new philosophy of the Godwinians, along with Priestley’s natural philosophy and Mary Hay’s sentimentalism, on many occasions — that became the favourite straw man, more than the culture exemplified by Price, Paine, or Thelwall, who were associated more closely with the popular radical movement. A number of the most comically lampooned characters in the novels are philosophers allegedly modelled on Godwin: Subtile in D’Israeli’s *Vaurien* (1797), Coca-nous and ‘my Uncle’ in his *Flim-Flams!* (1805), Mr. Myope and Bridgetina in *Memoirs*, Mr. Vapour and Mrs. Ardent in

⁴⁴ On theatre in Burke as a method of moral education and political discipline, see Paul Hindson and Tim Gray, *Burke’s Dramatic Theory of Politics*, and my Chapter 2, Sec. 1-2.

Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), Stupeo in *Vagabond*, Mr. Cloudeley in Charles Lucas's *The Infernal Quixote*, and so forth. Many quixotic protagonists that embark on comical or farcical misadventures, such as Fredrick Fenton in *Vagabond* and Bridgetina in *Memoirs*, read and are seduced by Godwinian philosophy. A work such as *The History of Sir George Warrington; or the Political Quixote* (1797), however, does not particularly adopt a comic tone, as the title may suggest, in representing the eponymous quixotic hero who radicalised through readings of Paineite, not Godwinian, literature, while the literature of new philosophy is absent in the novel's indictment of radicalism. The *Analytical Review* once complained of the *Vagabond* for concentrating its ridicule of radicalism on *Political Justice* alone.⁴⁵ On the other hand, as scholars recognise, mass civil unrest was not often represented in detail (let alone ridiculed or caricatured), while the usual setting of rural community in the novel was often a conscious attempt to put at a distance urban insurrections from below.⁴⁶ Indeed, 'Jacobinism' was a convenient blanket term for diverse positions of political reform that may obscure differences even within such organisation as the London Corresponding Society, which accommodated both the 'polite' and the popular grassroots approaches to

⁴⁵ *Analytical Review*, New Series, 1 (February 1799), 210-15, quoted in Walker, *Vagabond*, 373-78.

⁴⁶ See Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novels*, ch. 2; Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution*, ch. 4; April London, 'Novel and History in Anti-Jacobin Satire', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 3 (2000), 77.

politics.⁴⁷

Although often characterised as ‘comic’, the novels in question strive to juggle with distinct tonalities in representing the revolution as a threat or as a joke. The forceful circumference of the ambit of common life against the metaphysical assault of new philosophy is, *inter alia*, embedded in the anxiety about the threat of the crowd. This anxiety may take many forms, from the vision of insurrectionary threat of the lower order to the fear of chaos and confusion brought about by the alleged homogeneity in the language of universalism or collectivism. James Beattie added to his incongruity theory of humour in 1790: ‘For a mixture appears in the people, and in the houses, of every large town; yet a large town, or a great multitude, is rather a sublime than a ludicrous subject’⁴⁸ For Beattie, the sheer mass of the crowd exceeds comicality and approaches the ‘sublime’. D’Israeli’s *Vaurien* describes the country protagonist’s first impression of London — ‘that universe of a city, containing all the of human mind, all the variation of human species’ — as nothing short of (Dickensian) dazzle and disorientation, concluding that ‘no object of London was more

⁴⁷ Iain McCalman has pointed out in his *Radical Underworld* about the tension within popular reform societies between the ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ approaches to politics that eventually differentiated self-made working-class gentlemen such as Francis Place and the later Thelwall and the more insurrectionary and ‘unrespectable’ radicals like Thomas Evans and Thomas Spence. See Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For a recent elaboration on this theme see Michael T. Davis and Paul Pickering A. (eds.), *Unrespectable Radicals?: Popular Politics in the Age of Reform* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2008).

⁴⁸ James Beattie, *Elements of Moral Science* (Edinburgh, 1790), 1: 161.

interesting than London itself'.⁴⁹ The syntax of this sentence suggests that an extremely rapid succession of varieties of impression ironically leaves no impression of any single object but the collectivised Object. Most of the comedy in *Vaurien* does not occur outdoors, probably because the social mixture at such a scale is so formidable that its potential comic incongruity is obscured. As the anxiety about popular politics mounted in the 1790s, the multitude was represented as the unrepresentable *per se* in loyalist literature, as is suggested by Burke's calling the French Republic 'a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre'.⁵⁰ Burke's notorious porcine metaphor of 'swinish multitude' does not express as much of a Hobbesian triumph of caricaturist ridicule as a loyalist indignation and profound apprehension of total annihilation of civilisation. Hamilton also expressed her anxiety about the crowd.⁵¹ In a private letter, her ambivalence towards London reflected this anxiety: the dynamics of London life exposes one to 'new views of life'; but the human varieties and diversities that afford amusements risk being eclipsed by living in crowds, 'without ever having experienced a feeling beyond that of general good-will for any human being'.⁵² This insight concurs with Burke's polemic against the radical notion of universal benevolence and the insistence that authentic social affection based on family

⁴⁹ D'Israeli, *Vaurien*, 17.

⁵⁰ Burke, *First Letter of a Regicide Peace*, in *Writings*, 9: 190.

⁵¹ See, for example, Hamilton's letters in Benger, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton: With a Selection from Her Correspondence, and Other Unpublished Writings* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 2: 157, 179.

⁵² Letter to 'Dr. H—' (12th Dec. 1811), quoted in Benger, *Elizabeth Hamilton*, 140.

and local ties is how a viable community is maintained.⁵³ For Hamilton, the collective uniformity of the crowd marks the impoverishment of social life, renders the ‘social virtues’ deficient, and is ‘for ever occurring to poison the sweets of social intercourse’.⁵⁴ Forms of crowd mark the limits of common life that must be lived out in ‘sweets of social intercourse’, where comedy can only take place. Its antidote will appear to reside in smaller society, such as a familial society with choice acquaintances.

Hamilton’s *Memoirs* concentrates her comic caricature on the philosophical circle of Bridgetina Botherim, whereas the other major Jacobin individual, the vagabond sham-philosopher Alphonse Vallaton, is given as a cautionary tale of a dangerous radical, despite a slightly mock-picaresque introduction of the character in the beginning. As we have seen Chapter 1, some critical literature on comedy goes so far as to separate vice from folly as its proper subject: while folly can be properly laughed at, vice is too grave and dangerous to be a comic subject and can only be tackled in satire.⁵⁵ This reality informs Hamilton’s structure of narrative justice, in which the vicious Vallaton must be banished and extirpated (he is eventually ignominiously executed in France) and Bridgetina be reformed and reintroduced into society. Also significant is Hamilton’s astonishing assignment of Vallaton’s secret identity as a hairdresser, which clearly employs the late-eighteenth-century ideological association of barber and

⁵³ The view is most articulated in *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), in *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 8, ed. L.G. Mitchell and William B. Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 314-15.

⁵⁴ Letter to ‘Dr. H—’, 140.

⁵⁵ See Chapter 1, pp. 68-69.

low-class conspiracy.⁵⁶ If Bridgetina's folly lies principally in her inability to transmit subversive principles, the vice beyond comic or satiric redemption in Vallaton is the possibility of translating private intellectual folly into public sentiment. As Grenby remarks on the private philosophical pursuit of Mr. Mental in Thomas Skinner Surr's *George Barnwell* (1798), the readers recognise that such practice is 'innocuous if kept to himself, but highly reprehensible' if spread to the unthinking.⁵⁷

In examples such as the co-presence of a 'philosophical' individualist like Bridgetina and the mass insurrectionist like Vallaton, two kinds of conservative apprehension can be thus identified. On the one hand, we have the emphasis on individual autonomy in Godwinian philosophy and, to some extent, Paine's discourse of natural 'man' as freestanding individual, which discredit inherited institutions and atomise society, and on the other, partly as a consequence of this atomised society, we have the radical crowd that is freely and contingently amassed. Both were regarded as negation of community. Nevertheless, to defeat their dangerous alliance, the anti-Jacobin novelists managed to identify the

⁵⁶ As Don Herzog documents, the increasingly demonised hairdresser in the wake of the French Revolution was often associated with images of treacherous masquerader and political opportunist from below, with mercantile, deceptive personality and fluid identity, capitalising on social mobility and the confusions of public spheres. Herzog, 'The Trouble with Hairdressers', in *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders*, 455-504. Commenting on the class allegory epitomised in Vallaton, Gary Kelly writes that it advances the case for hierarchy of upper class over the lower in prevention of social mixing and dissemination of decadence from above, 'Otherwise the result, as in France, will be revolution replacing one corrupt despotism by another, both decadently courtly and vulgarly plebeian — a dangerous coalition of the professionals' class rivals. Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790-1827* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 148.

⁵⁷ Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 108.

tension they could exploit in order to separate them. Unlike other prominent radicals like Paine and Thelwall, as scholars have pointed out, Godwin, the rational Dissenter, remained distant from the popular-radical crowd, though he continued to influence the public mind in the sphere of print.⁵⁸ With a few exceptions, anti-Jacobin novelists chose ideological subversion over insurrectionary violence for comic ridicule, and therefore dramatise the rift between different forms of radicalism.

What can the comic mode of expression do against the rhetoric of transmission? I will shortly refer to the common eighteenth-century comic motif that is also found in anti-Jacobin fiction, but before this I shall briefly address the literary paradigm of their political opponents that provoked this comic riposte. The ‘Jacobin’ satire in characteristically radical gestures tends to locate the sources of evil in the structure and the system, rather than in the self. Godwin’s and Holcroft’s novels, for example, often took the form of synecdoche. In these novels, personal history is an index to wider structural issues, so corrupt lords like Falkland in *Caleb Williams* and St. Leon in *St. Leon* are symptomatic of aristocracy as such. Drawing on Raymond Williams’s understanding of the individual as an indivisible member of society, Pamela Clemit observes that the

⁵⁸ For an useful discussion of the different approaches to radical politics in Godwin and Thelwall with regard to the crowd, see Jon Mee, “‘The Press and Danger of the Crowd’: Godwin, Thelwall, and the Counter-Public Sphere”, in Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers (eds.), *Godwinian Moments: From the Enlightenment to Romanticism* ([Toronto]: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 83-102. In comparison to Godwin’s more polite model of the public sphere exclusive of the crowd, Mee argues, Thelwall’s was more willing to embrace the collective energy as raw material with the potential to be ‘alchemised’ into alternative public sphere.

‘Godwinian novel’ is the tragedy of the individual caught amid historical and social pressures, despite Godwin’s belief in autonomy of the self. The egalitarian servant Caleb, the boorish provincial squire Tyrrel, and the benevolent aristocrat Falkland are all sketched with typical qualities that underline ‘the breakdown of a progressive view of history’: though Tyrrel is superseded by Falkland, who is then challenged by Caleb, ‘all three phases collapse into violent conflict, as tyranny begets tyranny’.⁵⁹ It is in this manner, as Clemit identifies, that Godwin’s characterisation can be read as a revision of Richardson’s exemplary character. Godwin’s political allegory renders individualism subject to the social chain of being, as the intricate web of social and political determinants of civilisation ties individuals down to Theophrastan types. Personality in the ‘Jacobin’ novel involves an index of a continuum between the personal and the political, in which personal tragedy serves as transparent allegory to the structural evils. As such, Gary Kelly has written of the ‘necessitarian’ aesthetic of the Jacobin novel: since ‘the characters of men originate in their external circumstances’, the individual psychological realism is directly symptomatic of broader institutional issues.⁶⁰ The individuals are partly responsible but do not take the whole blame, and moral reprobation is metonymically deferred by general speculation.

As a counter to this ‘necessitarian aesthetic’, ‘anti-Jacobin’ comedy sought to dissever such metonymical universality by insulating the individual ‘character’.

⁵⁹ Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Forms of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 48-49, 52.

⁶⁰ Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 16.

In so doing, moral criteria were applicable again to the individual.⁶¹ Although both Godwin and the anti-Jacobin novelists were influenced by the Fieldingesque theme of the Theophrastan character or human type as a social product, the anti-Jacobins also made use of the comic theme of the ‘character’ as a private ‘humourist’, an individual singularity, which baulks at the sociability of his surrounding. In Chapter 1 I discussed this tradition, from Addison’s Sir Roger de Coverley to Sterne’s Shandys, who made so singular an existence that cannot be subsumed into any prescriptive ‘type’ except the Quixotic, the type of the un-typifiable. Such a comic model suggests the clash between the individual and social life rather than the contagion of collective laughter.⁶² As the ‘character’ stands out singularly at odds with the environment, the allegorical continuum is disrupted by the social drama. The jokes on the ‘new philosophers’ are designed to expose their intellectual monologue to social and practical scrutiny, in which the breakdown of conversation and sympathy between the philosopher and the crowd serves as a figurative rejection of the revolutionary vision of a universal continuum. If Godwin’s novels, as Clemit suggests, constitute a fictional self-critique of the theory of human ‘perfectibility’, his anti-Jacobin critics ignore such self-critical distance. While the contextual constraints on the character in Godwin’s novels render autonomy a utopian hypothesis that can only take shape *after* profound inquiries into the dense institutional mediations of social and

⁶¹ Lisa Wood summarises the antirevolutionary narrative in general as a ‘focus less on personal psychological and emotional development than on individual’s propriety of action within a social setting’ through which ‘responsibility for “character” is therefore transferred to the individual’. Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline*, 76.

⁶² See also Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

historical realities, anti-Godwinian parodies assume that the Godwinians take perfectibility as an incontrovertible given, thereby proving themselves ignorant of human factual finitude and its social being. As the solipsistic unsociability in these characters embodies, Quixote-like, the rift between the individual and his surroundings, the anti-Jacobin novel insinuates its symbolic social discipline, where the Godwinian revolutionaries remain simply private humourists.

Edward Dubois's *St. Godwin* (1800), a burlesque of Godwin's *St. Leon* (1799), is an illustrative case in point. The novel mimics Godwin's satire and presents an autobiography of a French aristocrat, 'St. Godwin', who is unable to find his place in society. Educated in the precepts of chivalry and bankrupted through gambling, his life has traits of the old order Godwin discredits, until he accidentally gains eternal life through 'the philosopher's stone', only to be frustrated and exiled again in his radicalised desire to benefit human kind. Dubois capitalises on the crippling alienation in Godwin's pessimistic allegory in order to neutralise new philosophy with rhetorical gimmicks. He mischievously turns Godwin the satirical author into Godwin the autobiographical character who contradicts and censures himself:

. . . thinking from my political writings, that I was a good hand at fiction, I turned my thoughts to novel writings. — These I wrote in the same pompous inflated style as I had used in my other publication, hoping that fine, high-sounding periods would assist to make the unsuspecting reader swallow all the insidious reasoning, absurdity, and nonsense, I could invent. The plan succeeded for some

time, but at last, they burlesqued my work, and made me look like a fool!⁶³

Seconding the anti-Jacobin consensus about the generic conflation of ‘political writings’ with ‘novel writings’, Dubois suggests that the ‘style’ that highlights the personality of the author is the glaring fault that causes this conflation. The distance between the satirist and his subject is obliterated. Through the shift of attention from the satire to the satirist, the satire is transformed into comedy. The Godwin persona is mediated here through a ventriloquised voice of Dubois, who distorts Godwin’s words in decontextualised verbatim quotes, thereby turning Godwin’s satiric allegory into a comic object in itself. The novel constantly throws ‘St. Godwin’ into deadened communication between himself and the individuals he wants to inculcate with his doctrines, thus rendering him a ludicrous soliloquist unable to spread radical ideas.

As a result, Dubois seems to successfully neutralise the political satire of *St. Leon*, as sympathetic contemporary reviews suggested, into comic pastiche. This hollowing of the semantic dimension into empty signifiers agrees with the characteristic anti-Jacobin technique of displaced citation in fictional context. Along with *St. Godwin*, Hamilton’s *Memoirs*, Walker’s *Vagabond*, ‘Mrs. Bullock’s’ *Dorothea*, and D’Israeli’s *Vaurien*, among others, feature verbatim quotations from works of new philosophy by the Quixotic characters. Clearly, this rhetorical sleight-of-hand enhances the Quixotism of these characters by

⁶³ Dubois, *St. Godwin: A Tale of the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Century* (1800). ed. Robert Miles (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), 209.

rendering their words decontextualised and therefore resembling a monologue misplaced in practical context. But again, these examples should not be unequivocally taken as an attempt at nothing but the alienation of intellectual radicals.⁶⁴ Herein is, of course, the implicit riposte to the radical confusion of genres of philosophy and fiction by subordinating fiction to a didactic medium of philosophy (which in fact was not entirely true of Godwinian radicals).⁶⁵ As I have argued, political humour involves not only satiric partisanship but can also be conducive to comic rapport-building. This spirit informed contemporary reviews of *St. Godwin*. The *Monthly Review* wrote: “Blessed (say we) be the man who invented laughing.” Sancho was never more relieved by *sleep* than we, who are obliged to wade through a mass of dullness, are by a *hearty laugh*; we hope, therefore, that Mr. Godwin will not be offended’.⁶⁶ The *London Review* praised Dubois who, ‘with considerable ingenuity, employed the powers of ridicule, without any of the severity of indignant satire’.⁶⁷ The *Monthly Mirror* granted the novel its poetic license, stating that the burlesque is simply an exercise of a ‘justifiable liberty’ that agrees with Godwin’s own principle.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ See London, ‘Novel and History’, 74.

⁶⁵ Scholars have pointed out that Godwin affirmed the distinctive function of fiction irreplaceable by and complementary to philosophical writings; as David McCracken puts it, ‘the two talents of “reason” and “imagination”, while separate, are finally complementary: Godwin the philosopher and Godwin the novelist are allies, not antagonists’. McCracken, ‘Godwin’s Literary Theory: The Alliance between Fiction and Political Philosophy’, *Philological Quarterly*, 49 (1970): 113-33. See also David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 103, for Godwin’s criticism of Holcroft’s facile didacticism of the novel.

⁶⁶ *Monthly Review*, n.s. 33 (1800), 224, quoted in Miles (ed.), 244.

⁶⁷ *London Review*, 3 (1800), 43 quoted in Miles (ed.), 235.

⁶⁸ *Monthly Mirror*, 9 (1800), 30-33, quoted in Miles (ed.), 240-44.

These invitations for Godwin to join congenial jocularity suggest the conservative view on comic function of political humour, which, paradoxically, suspends political difference by asserting the common language of laughter. We then arrive at another paradox: Godwin, the quixotic character and the natural object of ridicule, is not to be banished, but to be retained as the life of anti-Jacobin comedy. Gary Kelly has remarked that the one-dimensional characters in anti-Jacobin novels drew on the satirical Character-books of Samuel Butler and La Bruyère.⁶⁹ Alternatively, however, another tradition possibly at work as well is the notion of the ‘humourist’, throughout eighteenth century, as the odd one out yet indispensable character in enlivening the company with amusement, such as a Roger de Coverley, a Parson Adams, or a Walter Shandy, all of whom live as if in another world but at the same time are an integral part of common life, which abounds with eccentric individuals.

This comic pattern to a certain extent corresponds to Bergson’s concept of comic character defined by ‘a growing callousness to social life’ or ‘[inattentiveness] to his social surrounding’.⁷⁰ But while the counter-revolutionary use of this comic pattern may agree with Bergson’s objective to urge the comic individual to step out of his ‘ivory tower’, it has another dimension of political function.⁷¹ It serves to circumscribe what can be called the philosopher-humourist within the ambit of manageable scale of social

⁶⁹ Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789-1830* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), 63.

⁷⁰ Bergson, ‘Laughter’, 147. See also Chapter 1.

⁷¹ For ‘ivory tower’, see *ibid.*, 148.

circle to ensure the dangerous transmission of his ideas will not be carried out. By representing the philosophical-humourist as an object of innocuous, neutral entertainment, this aesthetical neutrality of character serves to neutralise radical agendas. In other words, the de-political aesthetics of human comedy that circumscribes the philosophical radicals can function as an effective literary policing. Another function of counter-revolutionary humour lies in the (re-)invention and insinuation into the rift of two extremes — the individual humourist at odds with the world on the one hand, and the collective subject threatening to efface all institutional distinctions of lived experience on the other — an intermediate institution of social being in which the content of common life is once again recognizable. The anti-Jacobin novelists adopt different comic techniques in demarcating these modes of social organisation. I will use the remaining space of this section to demonstrate a number of strategies that register the function of humour in counter-revolutionary policing.

A strategy found in such novels as *Vaurien* and Charles Lucas's *Infernal Quixote* is to shut the philosopher-humourists within mock-conversation in a mock-society of radical reformers. In so doing, they are kept distant from popular activities, saving spaces for legitimate communal organisation to cultivate social virtue as a demonstrative contrast to the vulgarised radical society. Both novels feature parodies of 'philosophical conversation' in reform societies, where radical energy is often consumed in counterproductive

speculations.⁷² *Infernal Quixote* tells a parallel story of the hero Wilson Wilson, a humble carpenter who is later raised to become an exemplary Christian gentleman, and the villain, James Marauder, incarnation of the ‘Infernal Quixote’, corrupted and wicked son of a Lord who is disinherited and who later schemes with the 1790s Irish Rebels to regain his land. The tale roughly follows a typical moralist narrative structure that sees Wilson’s virtue rewarded with a marriage and Marauder’s vice damned with death and the failure of insurrection. But what is notable is that *Infernal Quixote* goes further than *Vaurien* in comic technique, employing motifs from *Tristram Shandy* to critique the principles of the Revolution. While Marauder’s vice is vividly portrayed, Lucas also seeks to attenuate the apprehensive atmosphere by constantly frustrating his scheme in a comic environment peopled with ineffective comic characters. The reform society (allegedly modelled on the London Corresponding Society) is represented as a Shandean communal chaos. A Mr. Rattle, friend of Wilson Wilson, and a participant in the society, constantly plays sabotage by mocking, misinterpreting, and parodying the language and the ideas of the society. Rattle dedicates to the meeting a comic ‘Double Oration’, a parallel text that juxtaposes rhetorical patterns of religious enthusiasm and insurrectionary Jacobinism by

⁷² Nicola Trott notes in her introduction to *Vaurien* that the threatened violence ends in farce as the very ‘Jacobin’ calculating method to which the Godwinian party adhered backfires and deflates the schemes of mass uprising. ‘The clear message’, Trott puts it, ‘is the lack of any real popular support in Britain for a revolution *à la française*. The literary effect is a rather English fiction, perhaps, in which violent history is absorbed in comic effect’. Nicola Trott, ‘Introduction’, in Trott (ed.), *Vaurien*, xiv-xv.

substituting certain words.⁷³ The comic dysfunctioning of the society owing to the communicative sabotage is one reason James Marauder, the novel's villain, turns to other sources of revolt such as the United Irishmen. Unsurprisingly, Marauder fails to organise an insurrection, which mirrors the failures of the radical society.⁷⁴ Significantly, the character of Rattle embodies a Sternian critique of the 'philosopher', who is unable to accept his Shandean condition. For example, Rattle leaves his home door creaking, a symbolism apparently borrowed from *Tristram Shandy* that refers to mismanagement of domestic 'oeconomy'. It mirrors the domestic chaos of the estate of Mr. Cloudley, the novel's principal Godwinian philosopher, who affords Rattle much amusement.⁷⁵ Rattle's humour, furthermore, is an illustrative example of the comic moral teaching that accidental contingency and the farces and follies of common life are the human condition, a theme obviously borrowed from *Tristram Shandy*. As in the first chapters, the readers are given the story of the birth and the naming of the novel's hero Wilson Wilson as an accident from a miscalculated astrological theory of a Dr. Line, Wilson's man-midwife and a Dr. Slop-like character. The Wilsons accept this comic accident and raise Wilson to become a character of respectability.

⁷³ Lucas, *Infernal Quixote*, 162-63.

⁷⁴ As Grenby puts it, Lucas's representation of the Irish Rebellion 'must also be seen as an attempt to lay bare the danger of the Rebellion, but then to anatomise it, and thereby neutralise it, in just the same way that Lucas's taxonomy of Jacobinism [in Chapter XV of Volume II] has been designed both to alarm and reassure readers'. Grenby, 'Introduction', in Grenby (ed.), *Infernal Quixote*, 25.

⁷⁵ Lucas, *Infernal Quixote*, 214-20.

By confining the philosophers either in their mock-speculative circle or in the frustrating praxis of common life, this strategy is effective in representing an insurrectionary threat as remote a vision as possible. The society itself is represented as an assemblage of humourists whose philosophical whimsicality can have no impact on the public affairs but can only exist as a private hobbyhorse or a source of amusement for rational and religious individuals such as Wilson Wilson.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Lucas preludes his novel with a visionary allegory in which Satan (a symbol for Lucas's 'infernal Quixote') assembles the crowd of pandemonium and gives a high-flown yet slightly mock-epic oration. The Antichrist Devil claims inspiration from Voltaire, Robespierre, 'the demagogues of France', and calls for epic rebellion to topple 'civil and religious liberty' and put an alternative reign of 'Albion's favour'd Isle' in its place. The speech is immediately followed by a droll authorial intervention: 'The purport of this Satanic Speech the following history will unfold; it is unnecessary, therefore, to detail it any further: —but leaving this fragment as—a prologue—a prelude—a flight of fancy—an enigma—a romantic effusion—a poetical licence [*sic*]*—a momordian scrap for critic, a Zoilean sop—or, in short, what the reader pleases to think it—the tale commences*'.⁷⁷ The intervention serves as a shield against the horrific vision, under which the scenes of common life can take place. The tale then commences with two simultaneous births (Wilson and Marauder)

⁷⁶ Lucas, *Infernal Quixote*, vol. 2, ch. 12, in which Wilson attends their meeting and debates, but rather than persuading them with his principles, he is left 'as much entertained with the violent inconsistencies they advance[s] for the doctrines of wisdom' (136).

⁷⁷ Ibid, 39-40.

in a provincial town that echoes the structure of *Tom Jones*. One modern edition of the novel remarks that the tonal shift from the prelude to the opening chapters may be compared to Coleridge's remark on reading Fielding after Richardson, as 'emerging from a sickroom heated by stoves into an open lawn, on a breezy day in May'.⁷⁸ Such impression is, surely, a textual experience, in which actual threat is transformed into amusing words on the page, lodged in the space of domestic novel-reading. The allegorical prelude, however, reads not unlike a picture of wartime Britain, where the French war was often experienced virtually as media reports from a distance.⁷⁹ Along with a number of comic set pieces in the novel, this technique prevents the narrative momentum from building up until the second half of the novel, when the plot is to be carried out in vain — again — in the remoter region of Ireland.

The revolutionary threat that was relatively abated at home but renewed in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 informs Lucas's narrative strategy. Drawing up a contrast between common life being restored and preserved in the British rural environment and the subversive contrivers and multitude only recently suppressed in Ireland, Lucas's strategy divides comic naturalisation and satiric admonition between two distinct settings. But a subtler allegorical episode found in Hamilton's *Memoirs* exemplifies another strategy that presents a scenario of the philosopher's *encounter with* the crowd figuratively as a method of observing

⁷⁸ Mary Peace, 'Introduction' in Peace (ed.), *Infernal Quixote*, xiii-xiv.

⁷⁹ For a study of British experience of what can be a remote French war, see Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

the tension between them at a symbolic and comic distance. Hamilton prankishly designs a scene in which Bridgetina Botherim's self-indulgent sentimental 'soliloquy' is interrupted by 'a more indignified source', a drove of pigs, which mob her in a moment: 'The obstreperous and unmanageable animals, not contented with terrifying her by their snorting and grunting, (a species of music very little in unison with the tender feelings) pushed her from side to side in a most ungentle manner'. The coarse, 'unenlightened' pig-drovers, instead of running to her aid, wickedly laughs at her clumsiness as she is finally driven to the ground, prostrate.⁸⁰ It is intriguing that the apparent allegory of Burke's 'swinish multitude' is employed not as object of insult but as a weapon against Bridgetina's solipsistic sentimentalism. Kevin Gilmartin identifies its semantic ambiguities as derived from different allegories of political conflict, or two radical 'sociolects: on the one hand, the political jargon that dominates Bridgetina's erotic soliloquy . . . and on the other hand, the vernacular in which the drovers defend their action'. Gilmartin also speculates on ambiguity and unresolved contradictions, as Hamilton seems to shift indeterminably between dramatising their clash and suggesting their confusion.⁸¹ Indeed, the comic episode of the pig-herd's mobbing of Bridgetina in a sense serves to eradicate Bridgetina's personality — her clumsy fall and her uncontrollable wailing assimilates her with the animality of the swine and dramatises the despair of transcendence. Bridgetina's radical subjectivity based on abstract theory, which

⁸⁰ Hamilton, *Memoirs*, 157-58.

⁸¹ Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution*, 155-57 (56).

aspires to pursue the primitivism of the Hottentots to liquidate ‘civilization’, is then ironically similar to the homogeneity of the faceless multitude, symbolised here by the swineherd. But the fictional symbolism is not to be equated with a realist representation of mob violence, and the pig-drover can represent the common labourer in the rural community from Bridgetina’s neighbourhood. The image of the swineherd can therefore play on two semantic levels: on the metaphorical level, as a symbolic parody of popular radicalism that mitigates the revolutionary threat, and on the metonymical one, as an indication of the ordinariness and coarseness of mundane affairs from which Bridgetina despair to escape. Bridgetina never manages to travel long distances, which not only illustrates her inability to carry out her ‘philosophical’ project but also serves to confine her within her immediate environment in which she plays the humourist.

The last example I will use is Walker’s *The Vagabond*, which dramatises the most direct and closest encounter with the crowd in order to frighten the philosopher away to an unpeopled wilderness and then back into the community of common life. The novel begins largely in conformity with the familiar comic technique of the conflict between the philosopher-humourist and the business of common life. As the narrative develops, with the philosophers’ peripatetic adventures beyond the ambit of common life — including a visit to Newgate and attendance at popular-radical meetings, where the crowds turn violent — the novel’s tone develops an alarmist ring as this practical-communal framework gradually loses its grip. A comic scene finds the Priestleyan scientist, Dr. Alogos, giving a political lecture to his barn (which he calls ‘Hall of Science’) on the

virtues of republicanism in ‘rebellion, revolution . . . destruction, murder, and violation’ ‘like Milton’s devils’. By these provocative words, he inadvertently incenses a number of soldiers in the neighbourhood into mob violence against him. He expresses his shock at their behaviour by unwittingly adopting Burke’s notorious denunciation of the multitude: ‘they seem to have liberty enough; they are treading down my fine flower garden like a herd of swine: there go all my exotic shrubs! — I believe they are a troop of Goths and Vandals, who pay no regard to science’.⁸² The ‘mob’, one can say, is created by the subversion of Alogo’s own realm of everyday life. At this dangerous exposure to violence, the comic absurdity continues to dominate the narrative, as the philosophers start to debate on the distinction between the ‘enlightened’ mob of republican virtue and the ignorant mob of the ‘Church and State’. As a sanity check, Walker at this point is given voice through a gentleman at the scene stating ‘All mobs . . . are alike, whatever name you may give them’.⁸³ The group then decides to abandon civilisation and go in search of the Rousseavean ‘noble savage’ in the American wilderness, where a series of grave dangers, including cannibalism and intense starvation, sours the comic tone. By the end of the novel, the comedy has given way to horror and then to catharsis. The novel ends with the Godwinian philosopher Stupeo perishing in the fire and its hero, Fredrick Fenton, being miraculously saved and reunited with his love interest Laura in the manner of

⁸² Walker, *Vagabond*, 182, 183. Alogos’s experiences of the mobs in the novel might involve implicit allusion to Priestley’s real-life experience in the Birmingham riot in 1791, when a loyalist mob stormed his house. See also W. M. Verhoeven, ‘Introduction’, *Vagabond*, 27.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 183–84.

deus ex machina. Fenton closes the novel in making a Socratic remark that ‘All that I know is, that I know nothing’.⁸⁴ After so long an anti-comic interval, this recognition declares the restoration of the supremacy of common life.

4.3 Domesticity, the Novel, Humour and Political ‘Neutrality’

This section continues to use Hamilton as a prominent example of these questions: if humour is politically ambivalent, can the counter-revolutionary use of it always maintain its depoliticising social discipline? Does the comedy of character always function to regulate social intercourse? Can there be any gap between the moral community of the home and that of the novel?

I have argued that the humorous mode of expression in the anti-Jacobin novels not only as an alternative to debate but also as a constituent of a legitimate ambit of inquiry and social life. A significant function, as I have shown, is the shift of zone of engagement from (in Walker’s words) ‘political romance’ to ‘common life’. In this sense, the counter-revolutionary novel constituted an integral part of the conservative cultural enterprise that depoliticises those realms of experience that were dangerously politicised in radical literature. As has been pointed out, Hamilton’s work privileges domestic virtue and morality as a means of resisting facile politicisation as well as reaffirming the sexual division of labour in which home management and public affairs are assigned respectively to

⁸⁴ Ibid, 245.

women and men.⁸⁵ As Harriet Guest demonstrates, Hamilton emphasised domesticity as a 'neutral' space, an enclave from the pernicious 'party spirit' that informed contemporary political turmoil. It is in this domain managed by middle-class women, where business and labour are replaced by home comfort and leisured sociability and learning, that these women foster (perhaps as a female discursive counterpart to the male-constructed civic humanism) their cultivation of 'disinterested' and 'comprehensive knowledge' of the 'wholeness' of life. Guest explores the interesting double character of the home both as a depoliticised alternative of social system and, by virtue of its very 'neutrality', a microcosm that brings with it the possibility of comprehensively grasping the private and the political.⁸⁶

However, can the conservative writers fully command the comic language in perfect conformity to the political 'neutrality' of private domesticity and common life, or do they ironically reveal the wishful thinking of the 'neutral' institutions as depoliticised? Elizabeth Benger, Hamilton's friend and biographer, believed that the virtue of neutrality had been achieved in Hamilton's command of wit and humour in *Memoirs*: 'Such success was the more remarkable, as the subject was not new, and the ground had been preoccupied by writers of inferior

⁸⁵ See Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 42-46; Claire Grogan, *Politics and Genre in the Works of Elizabeth Hamilton, 1756-1816* (Farnham, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2012), ch. 2; Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution*, 149, ch. 8; Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline*, 53-54.

⁸⁶ Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 318-39.

skill. But in them, the spirit of party had usurped the place of wit and humour: in *The Modern Philosophers*, on the contrary, the alliance of morals and politics was carefully disclaimed, and consequently Aristocrats and Democrats agreed to laugh at what was ridiculous'.⁸⁷ By separating 'morals' from 'politics' and claiming that humour transcends 'spirit of party', Bengier posits humour as a moral category. One can identify a typical conservative manoeuvre that privileges moral over political concerns and asserts that such concerns transcend politics (or party spirit in particular). Yet Bengier's verdict nevertheless appears wishfully ideal when compared with Hamilton's who, in the episode in *Memoirs* I will now turn to, is aware of the fact that the 'neutral' space is being compromised and contaminated by politicised conversation.

What kind of neutral space and what has comedy to do with it? Hamilton's problem with her use of humour becomes eminent in an episode of *Memoirs*, where Mrs. Fielding, Hamilton's exemplary lady in the novel, receives Bridgetina as her houseguest for the first time. Mrs. Fielding can hardly forbear to laugh when she hears ludicrous sentimental clichés brought by her servant before Bridgetina is admitted into the house. Upon seeing Bridgetina in person, however, Mrs. Fielding is struck by her appearance and manner, which for Fielding are signs of wretchedness rather than laughableness. Whereas Fielding ceases to laugh and start to pity Bridgetina, the houseguests continue to find Bridgetina simply a source of amusement. She is regarded as 'a very extraordinary character' by a guest at Fielding's house named Mr. Sardon and

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Bengier, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton*, 1: 132.

possibly the rest of the company as well, who seems willing to allow Bridgetina to indulge in her hobbyhorse of philosophy through half-hearted flattery. Without the least awareness of sarcasm and self-knowledge, Bridgetina accepts the insincere praise with ludicrous complacency.⁸⁸ Yet such comic dysfunction of conversation is not morally promising for Mrs. Fielding, who, despite the conviviality produced by the farcical exchange of words, hesitates over its propriety. Later, in another scene of domestic conversation, Mrs. Fielding's reactions and interventions saliently mirror Hamilton's own authorial intervention: '[Sardon] was going on, but was checked by a frown from Mrs. Fielding, who, observing the eyes of the whole room fixed on Bridgetina, desired her to sit down in a corner less exposed to observation'.⁸⁹ Mr. Sardon continues to amuse himself with Bridgetina's eccentricity, which 'attracted around them a circle of ladies who were all eager to listen to their conversation', many of whose manners were as coarse as Bridgetina's.

The narrator then shifts attention from their conversation to an account of Mrs. Fielding's ideal sociability of 'the conversation of people of talents'.⁹⁰ According to Hamilton, Fielding's breeding enables her to select her company with 'discernment and discrimination', disposed to 'pleasure or improvement'. Trivial conversation such as 'a tedious argument concerning the etymology of a word, or some minute point in history or antiquity, for which not another soul but themselves could care a single straw; and sometimes a dispute in politicks would

⁸⁸ Hamilton, *Memoirs*, 255, 257.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 285.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 286.

cast a temporary cloud over the good-humour of the disputants', rarely occurred by Mrs. Fielding's management.⁹¹ Unfortunately, Mrs. Fielding has just witnessed a farce that rarely occurred by her management. The misconducted humour of the company vulgarises conversation that can become both overly political and overly personal ('not another soul but themselves could care a single straw'). Fielding's ideal model of conversation, it is clear, is in general in line with the polite tradition that is in a moderate position between the overly personal and the overly political, and is maintained by persons of taste. But the introduction of 'politicks' into domestic conversation taints the polite territory where 'common life' is lived and cultivated and thus can become alarmingly unrecognisable from the street crowd. For a proper lady such as Mrs. Fielding, even the domestic space has to function as something like a public forum, so one might consider her domestic management as an extension of the bourgeois project that Habermas identifies as the relocation of public sphere in relatively private arenas. Within this space 'politicks' has to be eliminated in the name of neutrality. Yet purposeless amusement deemed 'trivial' should also be eliminated. In doing so, Mrs. Fielding's model for rational 'neutrality' at such private space as the home effectively suggests an inversion of the distinction between the public and the private.

What is alarming for Mrs. Fielding in the indulgence of Bridgetina's egotism is that comedy is no longer able to cure misguided zeal or frustrate quixotism but risks encouraging them. Mrs. Fielding's desire for Bridgetina to

⁹¹ Ibid.

‘sit down in a corner less exposed to observation’ when being taken by the company as a jocular clown shows that Bridgetina has become something of a public spectacle. Comic motifs such as Corbyn Morris’ having the Quixote at the dining table, or Addison’s having Sir Roger de Coverley as a regular member of Mr. Spectator’s club, is problematised in Hamilton’s fiction. A simple reason for that is that Bridgetina Botherim is not the anachronistic Quixote or the Tory gentleman after all. Her radicalism is by no means anachronistic but by all means a contemporary threat, and her radical politics is considered to corrupt communal life as such rather than simply meddle with party politics.

The practice of treating Bridgetina as a comic character for the sake of the enlivening of conversation is, as we may conjecture from the viewpoint of Mrs. Fielding, a vulgarisation, if not a failure, of civil society. The counter-revolutionary establishment of domesticity as a miniature or displaced public sphere renders domesticity itself a site of political contradiction. Mrs. Fielding’s authoritative direction of the manner of domestic conversation not only expresses Hamilton’s position on women’s public role *as* private social agent but also reveals her conservative conviction that the home was not a ready arcadia and rather was in need of policing. Mrs. Fielding’s moral hesitation about wit and humour in domestic conversation evoke similar questions of female domestic propriety in the tradition of the female conduct book.⁹² In the novel,

⁹² Ideological feminine virtues expressed in humour such as modesty, delicacy, benevolence, and amiability were assimilated to the male paradigm of polite sociability. For Hester Chapone, in line with the paradigm of enlightenment politeness, wit and humour in conversation must be handmaidens to ‘improvement’ of ‘common sense and just reasoning’ rather than shallow dazzle

the political issue of Bridgetina's character is cast in terms of her impropriety, particularly in her confusion of private and public spheres.

Humour as a solution to radical extravagances turns here into a problem, particularly when it comes to the distribution of comic expression in social and fictional spaces. There is an apparent discord of voices between Hamilton's authorial portrayal of Bridgetina and Mrs. Fielding's attitude towards this character. As a character in the novel, Mrs. Fielding refuses to indulge in amoral laughter at Bridgetina's expense under the dictates of propriety. But the narrator in the novel makes an outrageous caricature of Bridgetina, who is given a squint, a short statue, and a coarse manner, which seems curiously to violate Hamilton's (or Mrs. Fielding's) ethical principle of benevolence and propriety. The literary reviews who praised Hamilton's counter-revolutionary moral lessons in *Memoirs* frowned on Bridgetina's characterisation: the *Critical Review* found it 'grossly and farcically overcharged'; even for the loyalist *British Critic*, it 'exceeds all probability, and almost all patience'.⁹³ Hamilton herself was not fully at home with the power and stretch of wit and humour, nor was she certain of its social function. In an unpublished essay, she expresses misgivings about her

and 'diver[sion] of an idle hour'. See Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind. Addressed to a Young Lady*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1773), 1: 156-158. Jane West in a letter of *Letters to a Young Lady* includes wit and humour in 'the Virtues more especially feminine'. Yet the content of West's argument follows the eighteenth-century principles that cheerfulness is an antidote of 'spleen' and 'gravity'; 'heartly laugh' is good for health; jest should amuse and soothe the distressed not mock their sufferings; the amusement must be discreet by 'taste', and so on. See West, 'Letter IX: On the Virtues More Especially Feminine', in *Letters to a Young Lady*, vol. 2, 4th edn (London, 1811), 383, 382, 384, 387.

⁹³ *The British Critic*, 16 (October, 1800): 439-40; *The Critical Review*, 29 (May, 1800): 311-13.

incompetence in the appropriate application of this double-edged faculty:

Though I had a strong relish for wit and humour, I never could learn the happy art of bantering the opponent whose argument I could not answer: whether he happened to have a long nose or a short one, whether he delivered himself in a drawling or a rapid accent, I derived no advantage from the circumstance. And though I could not fail to observe how eagerly such opportunities were seized on by the wits around me, and that many owed their reputation solely to their dexterity in this respect, I never could bring myself to imitate their example. My aversion to personal sarcasm remained unconquerable.⁹⁴

It seems obvious Hamilton's uncertainty about wit and humour here refers to the ethical problems in actual, face-to-face social intercourse and conversation rather than the comedy on the page. Her self-reflexive anxiety is reminiscent of the cautions of Shaftesbury and the puzzlements of Kames. Shaftesbury pointed out at the beginning of the century that laughter as a ridiculing weapon was always liable to bounce back from the object who undeservedly received the ridicule to the subject who unjustly laughed at him or her.⁹⁵ As an avid reader of Kames, Hamilton probably alludes to Kames' reflection on ridicule as a test of truth, which expresses a sense of despair in search for the definite rule of ridicule that can be followed and the conviction that only the faculty of 'taste' can be relied

⁹⁴ Quoted in Benger, *Elizabeth Hamilton*, 1: 299-300.

⁹⁵ See also Chapter 1.

on.⁹⁶ Hamilton's concern reflects many abiding issues of eighteenth-century ethics of wit and humour, particularly the issue of how wit and humour can maintain a balance between light, sociable entertainment and moral instruction.⁹⁷

Bridgetina is widely regarded as a pointed caricature of her friend Hays (and, to a certain extent, Wollstonecraft as well), not only for her ideology but also for her appearance, manner, and personality, to the extent of *ad hominem* derision. Hays' and Hamilton's private acquaintance came to a crisis after Hays published an anonymous, scathing review of Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796). Hamilton felt doubly offended at Hays' denial of authorship as unprofessional backstabbing, and at Hays' gross lack of humour

⁹⁶ Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (Edinburgh, 1762), 2: 55-56. For Kames, see also Chapter 1. An admirer of Kames, Hamilton shares with her intellectual mentor the advocacy for female education in virtue, judgement, and politeness, as well as the problem, suggested above, of the adequacy of the use of wit and humour in promoting polite virtues. For a discussion of Kames' support for women's cultivation to rival men in 'virtue', see Harriet Guest, *Small Change*, 242-43. Hamilton remembers hiding a copy of Kames' *Elements of Criticism* for fear of being ridiculed of reading what domestic women are not encouraged to read. See Benger, *Elizabeth Hamilton*, 2: 31. Clearly, she foregrounds issue of women's right to claim such faculty that has been alleged as a male monopoly. She showed this anxiety in publishing the first edition of *Memoirs* anonymously, when she ventriloquise the advertisement for the novel through the voice of a male pseudo-editor, 'Geoffrey Jarvis', in the preface.

⁹⁷ Hamilton was thought to have achieved this in her later historical novel *Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808), set in Scottish rural life and featuring comic characters. Contemporary critics praise Hamilton's comic performance in this novel. Anna Barbauld writes that 'perhaps few writers, without "overstepping the modesty of nature," can produce scenes equally comic, or, without departing from the airiness of narration, administer counsel equally weighty'. See *Monthly Review*, New Series, 60 (October 1809), 217. For an account of the critical reception of the novel, see Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution*, 289-90.

in her complaint about Hamilton's ridicule of Godwinian philosophy.⁹⁸ She retorted in a letter to Hays that Hays took her satire too personally to understand her attempt at lampooning general types.⁹⁹ Hays' belligerent irascibility might have irked Hamilton, and a few years later Hamilton published *Memoir*, a more relentlessly pointed satire on the Godwinian circle and even Hays herself. Critics such as Janice Thaddeus argue that Hamilton deftly maintains the balance of polyphony in this novel. The ridicule of Bridgetina, Thaddeus suggests, should not be taken as blunt comic cruelty. According to Thaddeus, Bridgetina 'is calculated by ridicule both to scare young women who think they can pursue recalcitrant men, and to save them from treacherous seducers'.¹⁰⁰ This claim as it stands is hardly verifiable, and does not fully explain why a caricature of Hays's appearance and manner has to be carried out in such outrageous manner, or why that has to be the only way to 'scare young women' away from radicalism. Perhaps the Bridgetina caricature was Hamilton's public expression of the private acrimony, yet even this is carefully handled in a disclaimer in her preface to *Memoirs*. Echoing her earlier, private letter to Hays, she claims again

⁹⁸ For these acrimonious episodes, see Gina Luria Walker, *Mary Hays, (1759-1843): The Growth of a Woman's Mind* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2006), 173-76.

⁹⁹ See Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution*, 143.

¹⁰⁰ Janice Thaddeus, 'Elizabeth Hamilton's *Modern Philosophers* and the Uncertainties of Satire', in James E. Gill (ed.), *Cutting Edges: Postmodern Critical Essays on Eighteenth-Century Satire* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 395-418 (409). See also her 'Elizabeth Hamilton's Domestic Politics', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 23 (1994), 265-284.

that her ridicule is targeted at ‘opinions, not persons’.¹⁰¹

This claim resonates with the discourse of disinterestedness of ‘general’ comedy that disavows personal conflict. Elizabeth Benger reported once on the positive effect of Hamilton’s moral education by *Memoirs*: ‘the author received a most pleasing testimony in a letter from a young woman, evidently of superior talent, who confessed she had detected herself in Bridgetina, and instantly adjured the follies and absurdities which created the resemblance’.¹⁰² If Benger is to be believed, then it also infers that Hamilton’s moral community is that which is constructed through the virtual conference of print rather than face-to-face counsel. Hamilton was very unlikely to have cured the ‘Bridgetina’ in Hays. I do not suggest that this private feud explains the intention of Hamilton’s satire, but Hamilton’s comic performance on the page does serve to displace conflict in actual social intercourse, which is transformed through the literary mediation of humour into a cautionary tale that can instruct the absent audience, the reader of the novel.

In the solitary reading of the novel at home, so to speak, the reader receives didactic messages from the author as a guide for the actual social intercourse in the same domestic space. The fact that comedy dwells between the author and the reader rather than within associative life can be telling. As I mentioned, the ‘neutral’ home may be a paragon for Hamilton’s public sphere, but in her novelistic dramatisation it is contaminated with a variety of private interests. It

¹⁰¹ Hamilton, *Memoirs*, 36.

¹⁰² Benger, *Elizabeth Hamilton*, 132-33.

may be that Mrs. Fielding's attempt to hide Bridgetina from view even in such a small company of house gathering bespeaks her apprehension of the invasion of the house by the crowd. Bridgetina arouses a contagious sentiment of careless mirth around Fielding's guests, who gather to indulge in meaningless laughter and disregard established rules of individual propriety. If comedy becomes a corrupting force in the social intercourse and a potential cross-individual disorder, then Hamilton's displacement of comic language to the space of literary fiction with a satiric twist could be read as an aim to encourage a temporary retreat from domestic society and a sober reflection in private reading. If this is the case, does it not imply that the eighteenth-century idea of comedy as a language of sociability has gone into crisis?

D'Israeli makes a similar claim of general comedy for *Vaurien*, that it 'contains not a single individuality; at the same time, that there is not one character, and scarcely one incident, which is not found on facts. In two or three places, where the attack was meant to be personal, I have *named* the persons, who are properly before the public'. He goes on to cite Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, whose characters are 'copied from the book of nature . . . from [Fielding's] own observation and experience'.¹⁰³ Referring to the comedic paradigm of the factual representation of character types found in common life (and perhaps Fielding's critique of 'party spirit' implied in his comedy), *Vaurien* offers itself as a prominent example of a counter-revolutionary depoliticisation that sought to recast political questions on literary, moral, and 'common-life'

¹⁰³ D'Israeli, *Vaurien*, 11.

terms. Likewise, Hamilton's disclaimers involve an attempt to situate her satire in a politically neutral context. But the fact that such a context does not seem available in the 1790s suggests that the difficulty of balancing satire and comedy will continue to trouble its practitioners. Can the Godwinian philosophy be safely contained in the context that isolates a humourist where this humourist can remain an innocuous aesthetic object and can freely pursue his or her hobbyhorse without disturbing the wellbeing of rest of society? In the case of Hamilton, it is doubtful. Both D'Israeli and Hamilton recognise that a Fieldingesque taxonomy that was disposed to offering controlling social panorama cannot fully tackle the contemporary political problems of the new-fangled discourse of (Godwinian) individuality that threatened to rewrite the relationship between the personal and the political. D'Israeli's addition that 'where the attack was meant to be personal, [he has] *named* the persons'¹⁰⁴ is of course a political act, but it is also, as it were, a satiric exorcism which hopes to purify the degenerated community that places its comedy at stake. It appears that common life as the (neutral) frame of reference is a goal rather than a given, while humour is troubled by its ambivalence towards carrying out that goal. Bengier's testimony in one sense seeks to confirm that Hamilton's caricature was really of a 'type', which finds real-life counterpart in a self-critical reader. But the exorcism of the 'follies and absurdities' of revolutionary principles suggests that the reading community in domestic life is in fact not a retreat from political conflict; it is already a tainted sphere where private moral faults might evolve into a political issue like the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Bridgetina character.¹⁰⁵

4.4 D'Israeli's *Flim-Flams!* and the Problem of Autotelic Humour

I have examined a number of aspects in the anti-Jacobin novel in which the comic form functions as literary and cultural discipline in a chiefly domestic reading context. I have also considered the conservative misgivings that comedy as a form of innocent or neutral amusement can also entail social corruptions within that context. But is it possible to imagine that the indulgence in comedy for its own sake is productive to the conservative case? I have suggested that the conservative reservation about comedy lies in that while it may keep the disorder of the crowd at bay to protect the realm of 'common life', it may also corrupt social relation of common life from within. But what if Hamilton's (implicit) separation of the moral community of print and that of domestic company is carried to an extreme, where one confines autotelic humour to the insular world of print, and where private reading and writing enables one to indulge in the hobbyhorse of however wild and pointless amusement away from social activity? What if this kind of the anti-Jacobin novel disavows any topical moral agenda and still claims to be alternatively conservative? What would the conservative review, as a vital organ of the enterprise of literary policing, make of it? This closing section reads a later anti-Jacobin novel, which is in some regards

¹⁰⁵ It is probable therefore that her caricature of Hays expresses her defiance against what she perceived as gender bias and saliently illustrates what catastrophe of female education it can cause if a woman is taught to become what Richard Polwhele in 1798 called an 'unsex'd female'.

untypical and raises questions concerning the coherence of the counter-revolutionary comedies post-1790s.

D'Israeli's wildly zany novel *Flim-Flams! or, The Life and Errors of My Uncle, and the Amours of my Aunt!* (1805; revised second edition, 1806) is perhaps the most thoroughly and unreservedly comic novel among the works that have been branded 'anti-Jacobin'. However, it is in certain ways anomalous to the novels of the 'anti-Jacobin' theme. D'Israeli suggests that its wild comicality perhaps exceeds conservative tolerance. In the frontmatters of the novel, D'Israeli produces a self-critical comic twist by composing five fake 'reviews' that he and his readers may anticipate from five leading journals — the *Monthly*, *Critical*, *Anti-Jacobin*, *British Critic* and *Imperial Review*, the majority of which are conservative. The 'Anti-Jacobin' Review is made to complain: 'Politics and religion are not even alluded to throughout the entire performance; yet so insidious and so wicked is this work, that it entirely concerns both politics and religion!!!'¹⁰⁶ As Marvin Spevack puts it, 'the keystone of the five prefaces is morality'.¹⁰⁷ D'Israeli quite accurately predicted the overall negative critical reaction, which we will turn to shortly.

Flims-Flams presents a fictional narrator who tells the life and errors of 'my Uncle' and his eccentric acquaintances that make up a group called the Constellation. The eponymous (anti-)hero 'my Uncle' is a bookish antiquarian, a

¹⁰⁶ Isaac D'Israeli, *Flim-Flams! or, The Life and Errors of My Uncle, and the Amours of my Aunt! With Illustrations and Obscurities, by Messieurs Tag, Rag, and Bobtail. With an Illuminating Index*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1805), xiv.

¹⁰⁷ Spevack, *Curiosities Revisited*, 221.

Walter Shandy/Dr. Slop character who is enthusiastic about system and metaphysics and morbidly keen on applying them to the business of common life. His friend Caco-Nous ('bad-mind') is, like the philosopher Subtile in *Vaurien*, another Godwinian incarnation who organises a dysfunctional republic in a small town where every citizen abandons their social duty and pastimes in favour of abstract debate. Like *Tristram Shandy*, the Constellation in *Flim-Flams!* is peopled with a variety of eccentric characters: a 'picturesque' architect, a naturalist scientist who wants to 'restore' dead animals to life by re-stuffing their emptied cavities, a sentimentalist who believes in telecommunication with plants, a female philosopher, and 'my Uncle' who quarrels with shades, plans to collect ancient Roman tears, designs 'ventilating hat' and 'incombustible cap' productive of 'philosophical sympathy', claims to invent 'portable solitude', and many other comic extravagances. The narrator considers his 'Uncle' a 'peerless character'.¹⁰⁸ *Flim-Flams!* presents a society of private humourists that seems to afford amusement more than provoke alarm. As the Shandys are confined within the parameter of 'four English miles' which comprises an archipelago of hobbyhorsical characters, the country-based Film-Flamers are also removed from the urban crowd and remain privately occupied in their whimsical pursuit without being able to communicate or build sympathy with each other. In *Vaurien*, D'Israeli had presented a number of 'hobbyhorsical' characters of the country in the neighbourhood of the protagonist Charles Hamilton before he left for London. These private 'hobbyhorsical' humourists differ from the humourist

¹⁰⁸ D'Israeli, *Flim-Flams!* (1805), 2.

as ‘philosopher’ of the city, who dangerously meddle with the urban chaos. Yet the country humourists retreat into the background at the end of the first chapter, and D’Israeli had to cope for the rest of the novel with the dangerous urban radical ones through a number of mock-heroic techniques. *Flim-Flams!*, on the other hand, situates philosophical humourist in the private country setting where the comic farce is unscrupulously played out. Throughout the novel, mockery on Godwinian philosophy involves almost no allusion to the Revolution *per se*.

This novel was controversial at the time of its publication, and was subsequently ignored. Benjamin D’Israeli made no mention of it in his memoir of his father.¹⁰⁹ Samuel Smiles reports in the nineteenth century that this novel was forgotten.¹¹⁰ The first edition of *Flim-Flams!* was published anonymously. Marvin Spevack reports that D’Israeli denied authorship to the *British Critic* in 1805, the year of the first edition, for uncertain reasons.¹¹¹ The second edition, published in the next year, underwent a revamp in which the five reviews disappears, an ‘apology’ is added, the chapters are heavily reshuffled, some of which are rewritten or added. He also adds a brief episode where the Godwinian philosopher Caco-Nous supervises his fellow philosophers of the provincial town into a farcical dystopia of the revolutionary republic.¹¹² Perhaps in doing so he

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Benjamin Disraeli, ‘Life and Writings of the Author’, in Isaac D’Israeli, *Curiosities of Literature*, 14th edn (New York, 1865), 3-46.

¹¹⁰ Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray, with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the House, 1768-1843* (London: J. Murray, 1891), 43.

¹¹¹ See Marvin Spevack, *Curiosities Revisited*, 229.

¹¹² *Flim-Flams!*, 2nd edn (1806), 1: 82-83; See also Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 101.

wanted to assure his critics that his laughter could indeed be harnessed to approvable political purposes such as the discrediting of new philosophy. D'Israeli's biographer James Odgen reports the turbulence caused by this publishing event: D'Israeli was involved in talks of libel actions and was reluctant to publish the second edition until the controversy about the first settled, but remained confident about its moral integrity as well as its literary merits.¹¹³ During these controversies in the wake of *Flim-Flams*, D'Israeli wavered between wild comicality and moral restraint. In his next novel, *Despotism* (1811), he returns to the counter-revolutionary themes of *Vaurien* that satirise the faults of new philosophy and threats of revolutionary insurrection, trims down the comic elements in *Flim-Flams!*, and presents a more solemn critique of revolutionary 'fanaticism' and the rise of Napoleon.¹¹⁴ In 1822, D'Israeli places a more critical remark that considers Sterne's 'humour and ribaldry' to be 'a perpetual violation of his natural bent' of 'pathetic cast'.¹¹⁵

Flim-Flams! is a relatively rare example among the anti-Jacobin novels in that it engages not only in the ethics of humour but also the problem of laughter. Its narrator does not regard pedantry and philosophical whim as such as a moral defect, provided that it is balanced with the mirthful spirit for free laughter: 'I believe no man of such profound erudition as my Uncle, ever so keenly enjoyed a good hearty crack; a loud burst of honest laughter; he and I would sit opposite

¹¹³ James Odgen, *Isaac D'Israeli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 66. See also Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends*, 45, for the talks of libel action.

¹¹⁴ D'Israeli, *Despotism, or the Fall of the Jesuits* (London: John Murray, 1811).

¹¹⁵ D'Israeli, *The Literary Character, Illustrated by the History of Men of Genius, Drawn from Their Own Feelings and Confessions*, 3rd. edn. (London: J. Murray, 1822), 2: 250.

to one another in the library, holding our sides with both hands, and laughing till the dome re-echoed with the heart-beating merriment' (1805, 3: 54; 1806, 1: 220). It seems that conviviality in the library is the same as that of any social scene. But Caco-Nus's metaphysical defying of laws of physics turns his Uncle to hilariously laborious stoicism:

[My Uncle] declared that "since he had known CACONOUS and KILL-JOY, he had frequently crammed his handkerchief into his mouth, or bit his nails to the quick, and even when threatened with an explosion of laughter, he has willingly stamped upon his own toes, but some of your arguments (said he) act on me like a feather in my throat!"¹¹⁶

D'Israeli's narrator attributes the fanaticism for metaphysics to the lack of humour. Concurring with counter-revolutionary satirists, D'Israeli breaks the alliance of the philosophers and the multitude by portraying the former's stoical pretensions: 'Does not the very language of the vulgar, which sometimes happens to be accurately philosophical, (said CACONOUS, pursuing the argument,) describe the painful state of LAUGHTER? Sensible persons frequently declare that they are convulsed — ready to burst — splitting their sides — and, finally, dying with laughter?'.¹¹⁷ The dangerous potential of the pleasure of laughter — levity, licentiousness and vulgarity — which is subject to conservative censure, is to certain extent permitted.

D'Israeli's attitude towards laughter in *Flim-Flams!* is problematic, if one

¹¹⁶ *Flim-Flams!* (1805, 3: 58; 1806, 1: 224 ['said he' removed]).

¹¹⁷ *Flim-Flams!* (1805, 3: 56-57; 1806, 1: 222-23).

considers the general conservative view that humour must somehow be regulated under a moral framework. The case becomes more intriguing when the radical Holcroft gets involved in D'Israeli's polemics. The young D'Israeli had contributed to Holcroft's *Wit's Magazine* with a humorous and playful piece on 'nonsense'.¹¹⁸ Later, as their political sympathies went separate ways, D'Israeli's took issue with the radical author's views on the ethics of laughter. In a footnote to My Uncle's asceticism from laughter, D'Israeli quotes parodically from Holcroft's *Travels . . . to Paris* (1804). Holcroft is represented as a revolutionary stoic, lost in the theoretical calculation of the pros and cons of laughter in relation to progressive reform. Holcroft's original text, in fact, addresses subtle ethical issues and expressed a more liberal take on laughter, but they are written off in D'Israeli's parody as he urges Holcroft to enjoy laughing as Rabelais's Gargantua did.¹¹⁹ D'Israeli seems to have brushed aside its complex ethics by reaffirming the Sternian ethics of laughter as simply against

¹¹⁸ D'Israeli, 'Letters from Nonsense with Some Account of Himself and Family', *The Wit's Magazine: or, Library of Momus Being a Compleat Repository of Mirth, Humour, and Entertainment*, 1 (1784), 177-179; 'Farther Account of the Family of Nonsense', *The Wit's Magazine*, 1 (1784), 145-47. See also Stuart Peterfreund, 'Identity, Diaspora, and the Secular Voice in the Works of Isaac D'Israeli', in Sheila A. Spector (ed.), *The Jews and British Romanticism: Politics, Religion, Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 130-31.

¹¹⁹ D'Israeli, *Flim-Flams!*, 1805: 3: 56-57n; 1806, 1: 222-23n. The context of the quotes from Holcroft is in fact about the familiar question of the appropriateness of superiority laughter, when Holcroft's travelling company was met with laughter by the locals presumably due to their exotic oddity, reminiscent of Shaftesbury's reflection of the issue of cosmopolitanism in the scenario of the Ethiopians at the European carnival in *Sensus Communis*. Elsewhere in this book, Holcroft assures that 'it is polite never to take offence at a joke' on foible. Holcroft, *Travels from Hamburg, through Westphalia, Holland, and the Netherlands, to Paris* (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), 42, 187.

the spleen. Holcroft, on the other hand, raises a familiar reservation that laughter may become an obstacle to ‘sound sense’ and ‘pure wisdom’ if it is performed without a view to improvement. In doing so, he employs the Godwinian progressive idea that the triumph of reason eventually overcomes the confines of passion and necessity on which the ethics of laughter is supposed to dwell.¹²⁰

Flim-Flams!, on the other hand, appears to maintain that laughter can pass as an innocuous private pleasure. However, it does not foreclose the question of milder ethical reform such as laughter’s improvement of communication and sociability. In the second edition, D’Israeli seems to have developed doubts about the communicability of laughter. D’Israeli adds an ‘apology’ by a ‘Bobtail’, *Flim-Flams!*’s fictional annotator, who breaks the news that its ‘illustrious author . . . died of vexation — and laughter!’.¹²¹ This Bobtail presents the ‘author’ as just another hobbyhorsical character whose obsession is laughter itself. Bobtail recalls the scene at the deathbed of the ‘author’, who continues to enthuse over laughter and ‘flim-flaming’ and implicitly mocks the solipsistic vanity in My Uncle’s and Coca-Nus’s philosophical pretension, but whose persistence in laughter verges on the very solipsistic vanity he mocks. Bobtail poses as symbolic censorship on D’Israeli’s authorial persona, as he appears to be sceptical of the fictional author’s philosophy of laughter and ‘flim-flaming’. In their deathbed dialogue, the ‘author’ insists that ‘My Flim-Flams were designed as the child of Pleasantry and Banter.’ He claims that ‘The honey-moon

¹²⁰ Ibid, 42.

¹²¹ D’Israeli, *Flim-Flams!*, (1806), 1: xv.

between Author and Bookseller was one of the sweetest we have had for many a year!’¹²² He enthuses about jest, raillery, and ‘flim-flam’ as a communicative action in the reading world, even a common language that connects all fields of knowledge: ‘Do we not every day observe the Antiquary bantering his brother Antiquary; the Picturesquists rallying their rivals; does not the Geologist smile at the results of his own calculations? Do not Metaphysicians hold terrible logomachies? Do not the Chemists laugh in one another's faces, scarred by their own discoveries? Do not the Mechanists confess, that nine-tenths of their inventions, are no inventions at all?’¹²³ Yet this recognition and the implicit tolerance for the ubiquitous ludicrousness in all fields of knowledge and literature ends up implying that the richness of eccentric curiosities D’Israeli upholds amounts, through the ethics of laughter, to a universal and even timeless value. The author insists that ‘gravity’ should be driven away by laughter, and ‘good-sense and good-nature never quarrel with a flim-flam, are never alarmed, and can laugh with the jester’.¹²⁴ This rhetoric is clearly an echo to Sterne and evokes the eighteenth-century amiable humour that was thought to be conducive to sociability. Bobtail, however, comments that the author’s self-righteous vindication of ‘flim-flam’ verges on a solipsist monologue, ‘a delirium of vanity’. Shortly after, Bobtail reports, ‘he went off in one clap of laughter, and seems to *die perfectly with himself!*’¹²⁵ Bobtail’s qualm appears to be that the autotelic

¹²² Ibid, 1: xxiii-xxiv.

¹²³ Ibid, 1: xxvii.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 1: xxxvi, xli.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 1: xlii, xliii.

bent of ‘flim-flam’ or laughter will render itself too private to bear on any communicative, more public interests.

In this regard, *Flim-Flams!* poses the difficulty of reading conservative humour, or even humour in general. It is not simply because of the possible tongue-in-cheek tonality (D’Israeli spuriously uses exclamation mark throughout the novel). The political and moral functions of humour depend on its reminding individuals of the human imperfection in faults and foibles — a favourite conservative theme — against the radical speculation of transcendence that is often read by the conservatives as deluded whims, such as those of ‘my Uncle’. Laughter is a corrective against the ultra-rationalism of ‘Holcroft’ and ‘Godwin’. But if this Bergsonian social function checks excess it also turns into an excess in its own right when its comicality eclipses its satiric function and becomes autotelic. The actual reviews by the *Critical Review*, the *Anti-Jacobin*, and *British Critic* were in general liberal enough to appreciate the values of wit and humour and D’Israeli’s approvable criticism of radical philosophy, but they were not very positive about D’Israeli execution.¹²⁶ The reason for the scepticism of the author’s command of wit and humour was because of his indiscriminate and unregulated mockery. The *Anti-Jacobin* protests against ‘the want of distinction in the author’s censure’.¹²⁷ The other two agree. In the verdict of the *Critical Review*:

We are aware of the folly of racking butterflies upon the wheel: but this

¹²⁶ *Critical Review*, 3rd Series, 4 (Feb. 1805), 155-57; *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, 20 (Apr. 1805), 371-76; *British Critic*, 26 (Oct. 1805), 399-405.

¹²⁷ *Anti-Jacobin Review*, 375.

author is a hornet who has fallen into a nest of wasp; which wasps, if they do their duty, will sting him without compassion. We have at length examined a book which conveys neither instruction nor entertainment: both because it abuses, not only respectable characters, but also some of our noblest national institutions for the promotion of literature, art, and science; and because its pretension to instruct and entertain are confident, although they rest solely on three hot-pressed volumes of heavy trifles, and nine grotesque plates, — in the room of which we think this author might have substituted the black or marble pages of his model Sterne, with equal advantage of less expense.¹²⁸

According to the *Critical Review*'s criteria of 'instruction' and 'entertainment' seems to need to be given in mutual balance based on certain well-informed and morally sound position, absent in D'Israeli's eccentric and unregulated performance. It seems to imply that D'Israeli fails to entertain because he means to entertain excessively, and is given to endless trifling of 'his model Sterne' without the restraint of moral taste. In fact, Sterne's comedy remained a suspicious legacy in the politically charged context of the 1790s. Alarmed readers associated Sterne's outrageously trifling and facetious style with French moral irresponsibility and revolutionary sentiment: laughter for its own sake was too morally suspicious.¹²⁹ *Flim-Flams!* may tonally resemble Dubois's *St.*

¹²⁸ *Critical Review*, 157.

¹²⁹ At the height of anti-French sentiment, a pamphlet published in 1799 held Sterne's amoral trifling responsible for encouraging French vices of irreligion and republicanism. According to the author, Sterne's failure to instruct with laughter makes him complicit with the dangerous

Godwin, which exercised little more than a thoroughly facetious performance of parody without balancing it with the moral instruction or demonstration of virtue present in other anti-Jacobin novels. Yet *St. Godwin* managed to garner more positive reactions, presumably because of *St. Godwin*'s far more specific and, for conservative reviewers, just targeting of Godwin alone. But *Flim-Flams!*, as if to test the reviewers, fails to draw distinction between radicals and 'men of letters' in its universal raillery.

D'Israeli's comic performance is possibly associated with his idiosyncratic approach to conservatism. One aspect in which one can single out D'Israeli from many other loyalists is on the question of the individual: while others insisted on local social tie against the universalist dissemination of revolution, D'Israeli values 'solitude' in ways that suggest disturbing proximity to Godwin's affirmation of individual autonomy. But the valorisation of individual solitude is predicated on a particular discourse that informs D'Israeli's distinct version of conservatism. In his *An Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character* (1795), two years before *Vaurien*, D'Israeli affirms solitude as guarantor of the cultivation of 'literary character'. This 'Solitude' is not one of seclusion and unsociability as such, but rather one that preconditions an alternative sociality to physical meetings. The 'invisible brotherhood', as he calls it in the second edition of *Literary Character* (1818), is found in the world of

'French freedom' that shakes the foundations of social order. See D. Whyte, *The Fallacy of French freedom and Dangerous Tendency of Sterne's Writings* (London: J. Hatchard, 1799).

bibliomania.¹³⁰ Such virtual, non-physical communal bonding centres on a literary ‘genius’ or literary character, who is an ‘isolated wanderer’ or ‘disobedient child’ of a parent but who comes to life in pages.¹³¹

D’Israeli’s thesis of ‘literary character’ thus rests on an ethical premise that is conspicuously at odds with most conservative writers discussed in this study. ‘Literary character’ in D’Israeli denotes literary uniqueness reflecting an extraordinary personality that is sometimes synonymous with his idea of ‘genius’. The ‘genius’, according to D’Israeli, is ‘in an eternal conflict with the usages of common life’, and distinguished by ‘an irritability of disposition’.¹³² For D’Israeli, the ethics of ‘common life’ has to take a backseat when it comes to the cultivation of a literary genius. In his actual life, D’Israeli occupied himself in practices of antiquarianism (and befriended prominent antiquarian Francis Douce), and spent a long time in library immersing in texts. These bookish practices are liable to become objects of ridicule in the tradition as Shaftesbury’s virtuoso and pedant as well as that of the counter-revolutionary satirist’s soliloquist and narcissist.¹³³ While authors I have discussed such as Walker and

¹³⁰ D’Israeli, *Literary Character* (1818), 9.

¹³¹ D’Israeli, *Literary Character* (1795), 30-31, 41. As Sean Gaston puts it, the character of ‘literary character’ for D’Israeli can be defined as ‘inherited disinheritance’: ‘In the formation of the literary character, it is neither family, nor friends, nor apparent mentors that matter—only books. One inherits the disinheritance of genius only through reading. It is in reading beyond and outside of the social environment that one is born into that *makes* a literary character and shapes character *as a literary affect*. One becomes a literary character through this perpetual dislocation.’ See Gaston, ‘Isaac D’Israeli and the Invention of the Literary Character’, *Textual Practice*, 27 (2013), 793.

¹³² D’Israeli, *Literary Character* (1795), 103-04.

¹³³ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, *passim*, but see esp. ‘A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm’.

Hamilton regard self-indulgent unsociability as detrimental to social virtue and community, D'Israeli identifies its positive (conservative) function in the private activity of preserving cultural heritage by annotating, anthologising and critically receiving existing literature. In this regard, his humorous portrayal of 'my Uncle' might entertain D'Israeli's autobiographical self-compliment dressed as self-caricature. Like a 'humourist', 'literary genius' is equally inept in 'common life'. This connection renders D'Israeli an odd case. While Hamilton, West, Lucas and Walker use the novel as fictional manual for manners in actual life and community, or as a cautionary tale, D'Israeli's concern is the value of imaginative writing in its own right, which he sees as constitutive of a community — a print community as opposed to physical company in common life.

Laughter and (parodic) humour as a means of reception, then, finds another conservative function. In the midst of charges of Sterne's plagiarism in the 1790s, D'Israeli in his *Miscellanies; or Literary Recreations* (1796) turns Sterne's alleged plagiarism it into compliment: Sterne are among the writers 'who imitate, but are inimitable!'¹³⁴ It is conspicuous that *Flim-Flams!* also imitates *Tristram Shandy*'s parodic allusions to knowledge. *Flim-Flams!* features a wealth of anecdotes and parody of the works of extremely diverse authors — including Philo, Cervantes, Richardson, Dr. Johnson, Kant, Lavater, Erasmus Darwin, Godwin, Capability Brown, and so on — all of whom are mocked for the

¹³⁴ D'Israeli, *Miscellanies; or, Literary Recreations* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), 318.

oddities and whimsicalities in their texts and the anecdotes of their personal lives. D’Israeli often parallels the whim of the flim-flammers in the novel with those of the canonical authors. He often depicts a scene showcasing the hilarious whim of a flim-flammer and then adds in a footnote that such a whim is found in the text a canonical author.¹³⁵ As the ‘author’ remarks in the second edition:

Revolve the works of the finest geniuses of this age — it is perpetual flim-flamming! SPALIANZANI flim-flams LINNAEUS . . . BONNET flim-flams LEIBNITZ . . . DARWIN flim-flammed BONNET . . . FALCONET flim-flams WINKELMAN . . . FUSELI flim-flams FALCONET REPTON flim-flams PRICE . . . KNIGHT flim-flams BURKE! Sir JOHN HILL . . . flim-flammed the ROYAL SOCIETY, DRUMMOND . . . flim-flammed all our metaphysicians; but he himself must pay the public tax which Genius imposes on Genius, and be hereafter himself flim-flammed! . . . Men of genius are all cuppers and bleeders to one another’.¹³⁶

April London describes D’Israeli methods of miscellanist commentary of canonical texts as ‘conservative iconoclasm’, which resists ‘hierarchies of knowledge’, but the iconoclastic mode is also ‘a commitment to the preservation

¹³⁵ For example, there is a scene in which a number of flim-flammers propose a ludicrous theory of the ‘sentimentality’ of plants. D’Israeli explains in the footnotes that such a whim can be identified in the texts of prominent botanists such as Linnaeus and Erasmus Darwin. See D’Israeli, *Flim-Flams!* (1806),

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, xxviii-xxix.

of residual values'.¹³⁷ In this light, the comic forms of *Flim-Flams!* establish an ambivalent relationship with the canon: on the one hand, the caricature of the canon serves as symbolic censorship to which men of letters are dedicated to the regulation of taste in the republic of letters; on the other, the iconoclast reading brings the deified status of literary genius down to earth to increase accessibility to the general reader, and to acquaint them with the unknown insider of neglected textual curiosities in order to facilitate a living, more intimate and more thorough relationship with the texts, which is jeopardized by the homogeneous universality of new philosophy.

While D'Israeli's laughter in *Flim-Flams!* is directed towards peculiarity and oddity, its universal application shows his view that peculiarity is universal and is worthy of conservation in his anecdotal representation. The idea of universal peculiarity inherits Sterne's philosophy of the private hobbyhorse, which, as Wendy Motooka argues, opposes Enlightenment rational universality.¹³⁸ In this sense, D'Israeli is in line with the counter-revolution against the radical Enlightenment of Godwin and Holcroft. But in D'Israeli about the relationship between the 'literary character' and laughter remains unclear, albeit that both involve a degree of private enjoyment. What is disturbing for many other conservatives is D'Israeli affirmation of a certain degree of the clash with 'common life', because it is productive of both comedy and 'literary

¹³⁷ April London, 'Isaac D'Israeli and Literary History: Opinion, Anecdote, and Secret History in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Poetics Today*, 26 (2005), 358.

¹³⁸ Wendy Motooka, *The Age of Reasons: Quixotism, Sentimentalism, and Political Economy in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), ch. 5.

character'. Perhaps it is the mundane practicality of 'common life', which might suggest proximity to demotic ordinariness and, to a lesser extent, to the radical universality of homogeneity, which makes D'Israeli anxious about the potential loss of the extraordinary individual as an essential ingredient for cultural meritocracy.

The mock-quarrel of the narrator of *Flim-Flams!* with his imaginary critics I have mentioned might well be a straw-man parody of the conservative review, but it does indicate the reality that the contemporary conservative criticism was not perfectly disposed to endorse comic techniques in the literary practice as an unequivocal antidote to radicalism. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* approves Edward Dubois's politically charged 'genuine humour, keen satire and sarcastic allusions' in *St. Godwin*. It claims that, facing the 'poisonous doctrine of the day', ridicule such as this is necessary to nip the flowers of evil in the bud: 'For although we do not allow ridicule to be the only test of truth, we still are of the opinion it may be applied with effect in the destruction of the false malignant and sophisticated reasoning of the disciples of Godwinian philosophy.' By the end of the review, however, *Anti-Jacobin* raises concern over Dubois's humorous performance, which features pointless entertainment and digressive episodes 'unmeaning and unnecessary' to the serious political task.¹³⁹ In the anti-Jacobin novels discussed in this chapter, comic entertainment serves the double function of symbolically insulating radicalism and disengaging the readers from the heady politics of the

¹³⁹ *Anti-Jacobin Review* (Apr 1800), 426, 427, 428, reprinted in Dubois, *St. Godwin*, 233, 234, 235.

day. Yet the effort of establishing the comic novels as a depoliticising enclave from political turmoil to prevent the epidemic of universal politicisation can also be considered self-crippling. As counter-revolutionaries were recruiting every available source to resist or overpower their political oppositions, the ‘comic’ strategies of diversion and disengagement to deflate radicalism’s momentum may run at odds with the direct engagement that the *Anti-Jacobin* appears to be demanding. As I mentioned earlier, D’Israeli also shows qualms about the balance between his affirmation of private pleasure and the social moral duty following these curious episodes of the publishing event of *Flim-Flams!*. I suggest that this problematic text indicates the potential fragmentation of D’Israeli’s conservative ideology, if not the very disintegration of conservative discourse as a whole.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ For an observation on the fragmentation of the ideology of on the radical side of reform, see Mark Philp, ‘The Fragmented Ideology of Reform’, in which he points out that the fragmentation is most obvious in the shift between appeals to the idea of a ‘British’ constitutional politics and ‘French’ ideas of universal political rights.

Conclusion

Humour and Common Life

I have considered literatures of a range of political positions to demonstrate the ways in which political humour in the literature of the 1790s can be harnessed to the contestation about the scope of political life. I have argued that one way to approach this question is through a consideration of the shift of generic hegemony from ‘satire’ to ‘comedy’, in which politically committed authors find some useful vocabulary to describe the changing conditions of political life as they perceive in the 1790s. In eighteenth-century criticism, ‘comedy’ was disposed to do away with these sectarian tendencies with depoliticising effects. However, as I have argued, it is through these allegedly depoliticising gestures that comedy reconfigures political matters. The implicit political character of ‘comedy’ provides useful grammars for the polemicists across the political spectrum to address the emergent political questions generated by the Revolution controversy.

‘Humour’, certainly, is not to be regarded as an unequivocal disengagement from politics into a territory of amusement, nor as taking shelter in the interstices of the political fabric in social life. As a byway of rational ‘debate’ that turns out to take a central stage in the political conflict, it reflects the process of the wide politicisation of the 1790s that rendered rational debate insufficient in dealing with a diversity of political demands and issues. Yet I also emphasise that the

limitless politicisation of the 1790s is not to be understood as a process of subsuming all aspect of life into a monolithic political framework, but rather as two fundamentally contradictory processes that are nonetheless concomitant, if not mutually conditioned or determined. I argue throughout that the texts of the 1790s not only engaged in the politics, but also the political: they wanted to understand and to contest the nature and the scope of politics itself. They tried to do this by drawing on a language that might help them gain a sense of the outside (illusory or not) of politics itself in order to negotiate and delimit its ambit. I argued that the language of humour provides this alternative zone of engagement in some respects. The contents of this zone include the categories of ‘common life’ and ‘human comedy’. These categories, as I have argued, gain increasing relevance for a number of political issues generated by the widened scope of political life.

The political controversy over humour is summed up as follows. The claim to autotelic innocence of humour in the comic discourse of the eighteenth century was predicated on contradictory social tendencies: laughing either reinforces individual boundary or facilitates transmissive and collective conviviality. ‘Common life’, which denotes a social relation in settlement, is the existential horizon that enacts this contradiction. With ‘common life’ in crisis or contestation in the 1790s, and with social organisation under political controversy, humour as a political disclaimer is thereby reworked into a particular political language.

I have argued that the category of ‘common life’, whose depoliticising

discourse of social ethics no longer held in the politically charged 1790s, have a troublesome semantic range, which generates its own political problems even as they are employed to deal with existing political problems. I will conclude this study by considering further the problematic category of ‘common life’ in relation to the aftermath of the political controversy of the 1790s. ‘Common life’ is depoliticising partly because it implicitly assumes a degree of universality. It seems, intuitively, to be able to lose its meaning, including its political meaning, if its semantic range is so universal as to encompass all lived experience of individuals from all backgrounds. But as ‘common life’ also denotes concrete, practical business, it may simultaneously suggest contextual specificity. The ‘common life’ in Burke’s *Reflections*, for example, is clearly conjured up to oppose the British political and social system to that of the French, which conditions lived experience in a different way. The ‘common life’ is believed to exist under an organic social structure of ‘British oak’, in contrast to what Burke later in the *First Letter on the Regicide Peace* calls the French ‘spectre’ under the Republican polity. The French polity is the very negation of ‘common life’ since its foundation, the civil society, is in Burke’s judgement absent.¹ The radical use of humour, as I show in Chapter 2, therefore problematizes the discursive construct of comedy as a legitimate expression of ‘common life’ by affirming the more mobile and collective manner of living. Therefore, the specific contents of ‘common life’ may be subject to conflict rather than serves as a universal plain of communication. As I argue in Chapter 3, Wolcot’s caricature of the King’s

¹ For ‘British oak’, see *Writings and Speeches*, 8: 136; see also p. 224 above for ‘spectre’.

effort to bring himself closer to common people's everyday business may reveal that the content of 'common life' is class-specific, so that the attempt at political conciliation and political control through the communication of private, everyday matter may ironically turn into political conflict. For the anti-Jacobin novelists I have considered in Chapter 4, 'common life' refers to a moral category that must be embedded in a relatively stable and more manageable social structure. Comedy for them often becomes a tool of demarcation that circumscribes 'common life' in the rural or domestic community away from the urban political turmoil. On the other hand, the 'polite' discourse of 'common life' often excludes a different way of life in the crowds of the tavern, the street, the theatre of the mobile urban world that contradicts the sense of settlement in conservative thinking.

As I suggest in Chapter 1, 'common life' as an ideological category is employed in the construction of the genre of 'comedy', or more precisely the general, non-partisan, 'human' comedy that depicts human faults and foibles in quotidian affairs. In this regard, 'common life', in theory, should be a referent for the universal existential horizon. I have shown, on the other hand, that 'common life' in the 1790s is also made a vehicle for identity politics. If 'common life' in an abstract sense describes the universal human condition, in a concrete sense it cannot be homogenous because of its material content. This is the ideological wager with which Burke criticises British imperialism: as he puts it in *Letter to the Sheriffs in Bristol*, each community produces its particular 'common life',

‘according to the temper and circumstances of every community’.² Burke’s understanding suggests that ‘common life’ is both universal and particular, since it denotes universal social being but simultaneously implies that the content of ‘common life’ in each (organic) community might be incommensurable.

The inner semantic tension of ‘common life’ between universal existential horizon and cultural specificity, in my view, bespeaks its ambivalence between conciliation and conflict. I will close this study with a discussion of Maria Edgeworth’s *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), co-authored with her father Richard Lovell.³ The book introduces to the English readers the Irish life and culture by focusing on the comic language in the Irish use of the English language. The republican project in Ireland was recently defeated in the failed Rebellion of 1798 that involved the activists from the radical United Irishmen. Edgeworth and her father Richard Lovell, committed to progressive Enlightenment values and once connected with the United Irishmen, showed ambiguous attitudes to the Union.⁴ *Irish Bulls*, written in the wake of these events, sought to introduce an alternative mode of conversation to tackle the political controversy over these turbulent events.⁵

² *Works*, 3: 318. See also my Chapter 1, pp. 53-54.

³ *Irish Bulls* has undergone significant changes through the editions, but I use the first edition in 1802 to discuss the most immediate response to the recent events around 1800.

⁴ Richard Edgeworth voted against the Union, but expressed attempt at cultural conciliation on many occasions as it became a fact.

⁵ Claire Connolly proposes that Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s decision to vote against the Union and leave the parliament before the Bill was passed was due to ‘a loss of faith in the powers of persuasion and indeed public discussion altogether’. See Connolly, ‘Writing the Union’, in Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds.), *Acts of Union: The Causes, Contexts and Consequences of the*

Edgeworth contends that blunders are universal and the English are by no means immune from making them, so they are in no position to use this biased image of the Irish as a proof of their lack of intelligence. If we are to believe the Edgeworths' claim that *Irish Bulls* is written with their 'sincere wish to conciliate both countries', then the content of the book suggests that the conciliation requires far more than formal political arrangements. It takes the knowledge of the language, culture and the ways of life. Featuring humorous details of Irish common life, *Irish Bulls* contains themes that resonate with those of the British controversy over humour in politics. *Irish Bulls* sets out to explain that many apparent bulls are of the species of Irish wit. As for the comic incongruities of the Irish expression in Edgeworth's previous publication *Castle Rackrent* (1800) that are received as 'Irish bulls', Edgeworth contends that most of the 'bulls' are in fact conducted with unacknowledged reasoning or witticism that reflected Irish manner, custom, approach to practical matters, and occasional political subtexts. As Henry McKenzie's journal *The Mirror* once puts it, 'humour' is culturally specific because 'common life' is culturally specific.⁶ *The Mirror* explains why Scottish humour is less prolific than their English neighbour: because the Scots have to use a language that is not their native tongue, whose idioms is only comprehensible when the writers reach into 'common and ludicrous pictures of life' by using the language that is 'as nearly as possible, that

Act of Union (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001), 171-86. Cliona Ó Gallchoir argues that this loss of public faith sheds light on the reading of *Castle Rackrent* and *Irish Bulls* as an alternative public sphere. See Ó Gallchoir, *Maria Edgeworth: Women, Enlightenment and Nation* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), ch. 2.

⁶ *The Mirror*, 83 (22 Feb. 1780), 73-81.

of the common life, that of the bulk of the people'.⁷ This is why, the article argues, their only works of humour are written in Scottish dialects, with which its Scottish users are more at ease to give the 'ludicrous representations of low life'.⁸ This claim suggests that humour reveals the incommunicability between different systems of 'common life'.

Edgeworth uses similar reasoning, but with a protesting tone rather than *The Mirror*'s humility. She claims that native Irish people are prone to blunders simply because English is not their modern tongue.⁹ Unlike *The Mirror*, which argues that the Scots are less able to produce humour because of their unfamiliarity with English, Edgeworth argues that it is precisely the non-native and odd uses of English that produce comic incongruities. The cultural intersection — English as the common language — provides means of conversation between the otherwise untranslatable relativism of cultural particularities. Moreover, the Irish cultural particularity is a distinct totality, and a totality of common life that encompasses all classes. As Edgeworth claims: 'The Irish nation, from the highest to the lowest, in daily conversation about the ordinary affairs of life, employ a superfluity of wit and metaphor which would be astonishing and unintelligible to a majority of the respectable body of English yeomen'.¹⁰

A reading of Irish humour as an introduction to Irish common life and

⁷ Ibid, 79-80.

⁸ Ibid, 80.

⁹ Maria Edgeworth, *Essay on Irish Bulls* (London: J. Johnson, 1802), 7-8.

¹⁰ Ibid, 160.

culture as a whole displays Edgeworth's willingness to establish what one critic regards as 'cultural partnership' with England.¹¹ But this gesture, reminiscent of the eighteenth-century comic sociability, involves a polemical twist. Edgeworth proposes cultural partnership with the proviso that the English learn about the Irish conditions expressed in Irish English. The 'unintelligibility' of Irish wit serves not as a brute fact but as a point of departure for a cross-cultural conversation on an equal footing. In order to open up that conversation, Edgeworth wants to jettison superiority theory. In the tale 'Little Dominick', Edgeworth tells the story of an Irish boy's persecution by a pedantic Welsh schoolmaster for frequently committing errors of 'standard' English. Protesting against the arrogant ridicule on Little Dominick, Edgeworth reiterates eighteenth-century anti-Hobbesianism that this laughter of 'real or imaginary superiority' is fit for 'the most ignorant' and 'the most vain', who are 'unconscious of their own deficiencies, and consequently fearless of becoming in their turn the objects of in their turn the objects of ridicule.'¹² She clearly identifies the demeaning stereotype of the Irish vernacular language as the impediment of progressive conversation between the two cultures. In fact, 'Irish bulls' was ubiquitously a main feature among eighteenth-century jest-book. Although Simon Dickie omits to mention, 'Irish bulls' were a permanent feature in the jest-book, a laughing-stock for the English readers, along with women, the handicapped and the poor. Edgeworth's main contention is that this mode of

¹¹ Rebecca Shapiro, 'Educating the English: Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and *Essay on Irish Bulls*', *Women's Writing*, 10 (2003), 73-92.

¹² Maria Edgeworth, *Irish Bulls*, 89.

facile triumph rules out productive mutual understanding of cultures.

Evidently, Edgeworth's critical inquiry benefits from the tradition of incongruity theory, often with explicit and implicit allusions to the Scottish criticisms by Beattie or Hutcheson. Marilyn Butler believes that the Scottish Enlightenment intelligentsia is Edgeworth's role model. For Butler, it is the 'progressive cosmopolitan history of culture' in Scottish philosophy that cross-fertilises mutually and fruitfully with Ireland's popular culture. The Scots were to be the post-1800 'role-models', who had 'established the ground rules for diverse but equal membership'.¹³ Elsewhere, Butler takes issue with the reading of the Edgeworths' politics as Protestant landlordism and supporter of the Union, and argues that *Irish Bulls* presents a 'hybrid' culture of the British nation. The Union was merely a 'fact', and its cultural identity consists of four regional particularities. She writes: 'The high and low strands help weave together a new, enlarged civil society and British nation. This is both a manifesto and an extreme example of Edgeworth's new method and new subject, modern culture itself.'¹⁴ This vision of 'enlarged civil society and British nation'

¹³ Marilyn Butler, 'General Introduction', in Marilyn Butler and Mitzi Myers (gen. ed.), *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), XLV.

¹⁴ Butler, 'Irish Culture and Scottish Enlightenment: Maria Edgeworth's History of the Future', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (eds.), *Economy, Polity and Society: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 168-72 (170). See also Butler, 'Edgeworth, the United Irishmen, and "More Intelligent Treasons"', in Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (eds.), *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and her Contexts* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 33-61. On cultural 'hybridity', see also Mary Jean Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870: Politics,*

resonates with the eighteenth-century discursive tradition about a liberal nation of humour I have accounted for.¹⁵ However, the theory about the universal expansiveness of civil society is often compromised by, I have noted, English chauvinism which would congratulate its self-image of diversity against the simplified others. Edgeworth's polemics thus displays a tactful appropriation of the English rhetoric by suggesting that this rhetoric is not progressive enough with the Irish excluded.

While Butler's interpretation is valid on some counts, I want to consider how far the *comic* linguistic aspect is constructive to Edgeworth's cross-cultural vision. Like other eighteenth-century comic theorists, Edgeworth sees humour as a distinct mode of communication from reason. She insists that comic blunders in social conversation be laughed at rather than be reasoned with. An Irish diner who wants his beef to be cut 'horizontally downwards' should be received as an accidental bull but should not be corrected by the censorship of rationality.¹⁶ As she puts it: 'It would, indeed, be an intolerable restraint upon social intercourse, if every man were subject to be taxed for each inaccuracy of language — if he were compelled to talk, upon all occasions, as if he were amenable to a star-chamber of criticism, and surrounded by informers'.¹⁷ It is clear, then, that Edgeworth considers not the semantic or logical aspect of language but the

History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50, 76.

¹⁵ See Chapter 1.

¹⁶ Maria Edgeworth, *Irish Bulls*, 59-60.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 58-59.

speech-act or language-game, which functions not simply to give information but to facilitate other aspects of social intercourse, which, for instance, can enliven the conversation with the Irish diner at the restaurant table.

But even if the performative dimension of language exempts comic blunders from rational censorship, is it restricted to jocular conviviality? At times, Edgeworth suggests sympathy or compassion rather than laughter as the proper performative expression. In an example of a ‘bull’, two Irishmen on a fatiguing journey learn that they still have ten miles to go. One of them cries: ‘it is but five miles a[-]piece’. Edgeworth makes it clear that the point of the story is not its logical absurdity: ‘instead of a bull, they have only a piece of sentimental arithmetic, founded upon the elegant theorem, that friendship doubles all our pleasures, and divides all our pains’.¹⁸ At times in *Irish Bulls*, Edgeworth highlights pathos that tempers rational ridicule and prejudicial triumph to promote fellow-feeling.¹⁹ But in doing so laughter’s role is also limited, raising the question of how to laugh with ‘good nature’ or when to stop laughing.

This leads to her implicit ambiguity, or indecision, about the epistemology of ‘Irish bulls’. Edgeworth is frequently vague about the distinction between a ‘bull’ or a wit. Should one regard ‘five miles a[-]piece’ as unequivocally a bull rather than a witty way to cheer up the companion? An expressive pattern like

¹⁸ Ibid, 91-92.

¹⁹ For example, the Irish bulls made by the wretched ‘Little Dominick’ (‘I have no father — I am an orphan — I have only a mother’; ‘I have no brother but myself’) should be good-heartedly laughed at with caring benevolence and without an attempt to ridicule it to coerce the blunderer into corrected expression. Ibid, 71, 72.

‘silence that speaks’, as Edgeworth reports, is often identified as bulls, but she also assures that such expression is found trans-historically and internationally from the Homer and Horace to Milton, Pope, Voltaire and the contemporary Irish speeches.²⁰ She suggests, correctly, that ‘eloquent muteness’ is a much-used figure of speech in the canonical literature. But if the pattern of that expression should be evaluated in the literary framework of poetic license, and if it is a piece of wit, why and when is it simultaneously a ‘bull’? In these problematic examples, Edgeworth does not elaborate on the criterion for the reader to identify a literary wit or a bull based in different contexts. She points out that unidentified satires cause the misidentification of witticisms as ‘bulls’, but does not consider why expressions like ‘Every *man* his own *washerwoman*!’ should be regarded as a bull rather than perhaps a satire on the sexual division of labour.²¹ In his review in 1803, Sydney Smith points out that Edgeworth is indecisive concerning the nature of ‘bulls’, and fails to grasp that the incongruity in a ‘bull’ is that a bull misrecognises false relation and ironically produces real incongruity, while ‘wit’ does the opposite in disclosing real relations through apparent incongruities.²²

Nevertheless, despite his analytical rigour, Sydney Smith fails to consider the multilayered concerns about the performativity of comic language and its entangled social ethics that lie at the heart of Edgeworth’s complex analytical confusions. Despite the lack of careful categorisation of the comic figurative

²⁰ Ibid, 218-220.

²¹ Ibid, 43.

²² [Sydney Smith], ‘ART. X. *Essay on Irish Bulls*’, *Edinburgh Review* (Jul 1803), 400.

language, Edgeworth's critical inquiry opens up new thinking of humour as a mode of social intercourse or a method of political negotiation between cultures or between common lives. In my view, Edgeworth's analytical confusions bespeak her wish to plead for perhaps too complex and too many kinds of English response to Irish culture. The responses she demands include sympathy (hence the plea for refrain from cold ridicules of Irish 'bulls'), respect and appreciation (hence the plea for recognition of Irish intelligence in 'wit'), benevolence, egalitarian attitude, tolerance, sociability, civility, convivial humour. Such wide range of communicative modes may not always comply with the jocular, mirthful, or facetious tone of humour.

Irish Bulls clearly seeks to acquaint the English readers with the particulars of common life in Ireland, but in doing so the role of laughter is also rendered partial. If the eighteenth-century comic theory concentrates on characters and manners as materials of entertainment in social scenes or even as relaxing feasts of jest to ease everyday toil, then it certainly cannot cover the wide range of social issues Edgeworth effectively raises in this otherwise amusing book. Edgeworth in *Irish Bulls* appears to follow the eighteenth-century tradition of treating humour as an anodyne for the hardship of common life: 'the poorest labourer [in Ireland] forgets his poverty and toil in the pleasure of enjoying a joke'.²³ However, the amusement in the *Irish Bulls* often has to be juggled with other performative aspects in the joke such as the expression of pathos. In Edgeworth's later writings, the reservation about the power of the laughing

²³ Ibid, 309.

humour increased. In her novel *Ennui* (1809), Edgeworth has her melancholic protagonist reflect on a ‘practical bull’ in his travel around Ireland. A number of Irish labourers at work in a bog on a hot day lights fire. This strikes him as a laughable foible, but he is informed later that the fire is meant to drive away tiny flies in order to continue working, and he feels embarrassed about his ignorance of a local custom.²⁴ The judgement of a ‘practical bull’ is falsified because the apparent incongruity of practical reason (lighting fire on a hot working day) obscures another practical necessity (getting rid of the flies). This example demonstrates that the apparent incongruities in the lived experience are intertwined with the complexity of material conditions. Edgeworth here offers the reader a possibility to think beyond the eighteenth-century incongruity theory. That the discordances, oddities and practical contradictions in common life are considered infinitely productive of comicality is probably an idealist wishful thinking. ‘Common life’ is an entanglement of practical concerns. The ludicrous incongruity can be a polyvalent speech-act, breeding amusement as well as other concerns and responses.

Yet Edgeworth leaves these questions underexplored in *Irish Bulls* and concentrates on the theme of universal tolerance of comic blunders, which was largely tackled on formal linguistic level in the polite language, while the ‘vulgar’ remains a source of anxiety.²⁵ Later in life, Edgeworth increasingly perceived

²⁴ *Ennui* (1809), reprinted in *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 1: 252.

²⁵ The conversation about the toleration or appreciation of Irish expressions is between three gentlemen from Ireland, England, and Scotland. The Welsh are elsewhere demonised as backward-looking and narrow-minded bullies. Edgeworth makes the Englishman remark: ‘Yes,

humour reaching its limit in Irish realities, as she remarked privately on the progress of the novel *Helen* (1834): '[the novel contains] no humour, no Irish character . . . It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction — realities are too strong, party passions too violent to bear to see. . . . We are in too perilous a case to laugh, humour would be out of season, worse than bad taste.'²⁶ Edgeworth employed humour to *introduce* the Irish question, but it turns out to be only a point of departure rather than the comprehensive means of tackling the issues of Irish life.

Irish Bulls is an illuminating example that it is precisely the conciliatory and depoliticising take on humour that produces rich political subtexts. Humour is effectively rendered a partial index to the extremely complex questions of 'common life' as an entanglement of cultural, political and material conditions. It may encourage one to regard the theoretical marriage between comedy and

among the vulgar and the ignorant, but not amongst the higher and better informed class of society' (Edgeworth, *Irish Bulls*, 389). The Scotchman also appears to subscribe to this demarcation between the 'well-educated' and the vulgar (Ibid, 128). Alternative form of affective cohesion like solidarity to a positive and voluntarist form of association like 'cultural partnership', nevertheless, is suggested in the remark by the Irishman after he hears the Englishman acknowledge that the English blunder as much as the Irish: 'I'm so glad to hear we have companions in disgrace' (Ibid, 128).

²⁶ Maria Edgeworth, *A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth, with a Selection from her Letters by the Late Mrs. Edgeworth. Edited by her Children*. 3 vols. (Privately published, 1867), 3: 87. For discussions, see Michael Hurst, *Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene: Intellect, Fine Feeling and Landlordism in the Age of Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 33; Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), 264; Michael Neill, 'Mantles, Quirks, and Irish Bulls Ironic Guise and Colonial Subjectivity in Maria Edgeworth's "Castle Rackrent"', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 52 (2001), 90; Claire Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

‘common life’ as arbitrary. The inconsistencies and tonal ambivalence may reveal her inability to deal with the massive range of issues, but it is to her credit to illuminate that the connotations of humour are far beyond humour itself. As Brian Hollingworth puts it: ‘Ambiguities and ambivalences abound in [Irish Bulls]. . . . This is not necessarily something to be deplored. Edgeworth’s uncertainties often add depth to her narrative structures, particularly in the context of the Irish political situation after 1801.’²⁷ By playing (in Stuart Tave’s term) an ‘amiable humorist’ with an amusing representation of Irish common life, *Irish Bulls* tactfully avoids technical political terminology in the wake of the political events around 1800. Yet it is precisely in locating the Irish question in the mundane particulars of common life that the political questions are registered fundamentally. Its reflections on humour signal the disintegration of the incongruity theory after the political turbulence of the 1790s, and reveal that humour as a political solution — as emancipation (the radicals), discipline (the conservatives), or critical distance (Wolcott) — could be part of the problem.

²⁷ Brian Hollingworth, *Maria Edgeworth's Irish Writing: Language, History, Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 68.

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